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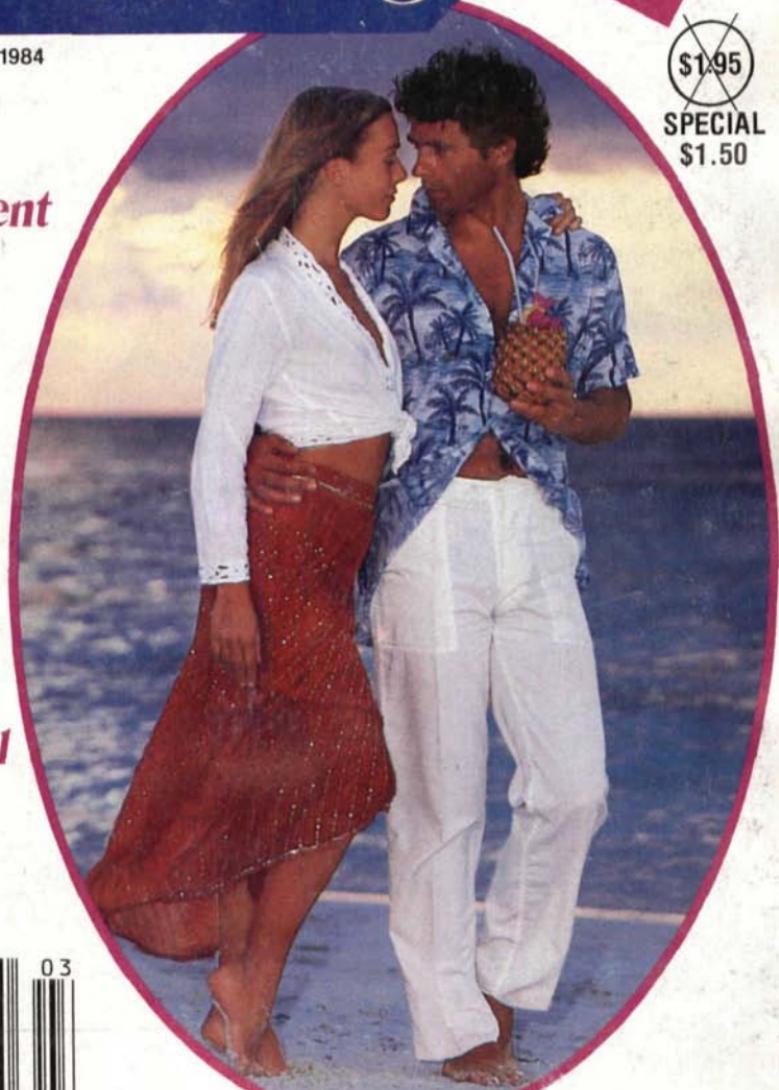
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5 Great Romances

MARCH/APRIL 1984 • VOLUME 2 NO. 1

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One More Time

Five years ago Portia had thought Simon Farrow loved her, and he had broken her heart. Now he only wanted her—and she did not know if she could hold out against him.

By ELIZABETH HUNTER

Portia Cochrane reached London's Heathrow Airport just in time to catch the flight for Bangkok. She was told that she would be sitting next to a colleague, but she was in no way prepared for what was in store.

How long was it since she had last seen him? Five years? Yet, he looked exactly the same as she remembered him, with those ascetic, unrelenting features and dark, mysterious eyes that hid his thoughts as effectively as they always had.

"By all that's wonderful," the man said dryly. "Look who's here in her

father's place! Are you equal to the task, Portia Cochrane?"

Portia sighed. "Higher education came in for women some years ago," she replied. "Or hadn't you noticed?"

She kept herself composed as she remembered how Simon Farrow had burst upon her world with all the vigour and excitement of a summer storm. Inhabiting, as she always had, her father's academic ivory tower in a town whose *raison d'être* was the university, she had never dreamed that men like Simon existed. She could only presume that

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America bred a totally different breed of academics, learned men who were also men of action, and young to boot! Simon had only been eight years older than herself.

She wondered if he remembered all that had passed between them that summer. Did he remember that last afternoon when he had kissed her? Probably not, she thought sadly.

"I was expecting your father," he told her. "This isn't child's play. Do you know how hard it was to persuade the Burmese government to allow us to work at Kuthodaw? They take their holy places very seriously. And I'm surprised your father allowed you to come without him. How did you make your escape?"

Portia flushed. "Father didn't want me to stay with him forever!"

Simon lifted an eyebrow. "Rubbish, my dear. The only thing he thought about was his own comfort. He's a selfish old man!"

"He's a sick man!"

"I know. That's why you're here in his place."

Portia lapsed into silence. She was recalling, in spite of herself, a summer evening five years past.

She had known he had been going to kiss her all day. There had been a look in his eyes and an answering look in her own. She had felt quite sick with fright and anticipation. Then, when he had kissed her, she had totally melted. But there had been no chance to carry it further, and, shortly after that, Simon had gone back to the States, never to return.

Portia looked away, and her eye was caught by a young man across the aisle. "Hi," he said. "I'm Rex Hollis, the expedition photographer."

"I'm Portia Cochrane. Ancient Oriental languages, Pali's my specialty."

She continued to chat with him, aware of the covert look Simon was giving her.

"I was admiring your skill in ensnaring your prey," Simon said nastily when she sat back in her seat.

"Do you object to my being friendly with my other colleagues?" she enquired sweetly.

"Not at all, just as long as it doesn't interfere with their work."

"What about my work?"

"You won't have the opportunity to neglect yours. You'll be working too closely beside me."

They did not speak again. They reached Rangoon that night, and in the morning Portia decided to visit the Shwe Dagon, Burma's most famous temple. Rex came with her to the golden pagoda that dominates Rangoon, a great, shining finger pointing up into the heavy, pewter-coloured skies.

Despite the crumbling concrete and its unswept appearance, even the entrance had a magnificence of its own. It reached up into infinity, a constant procession of people coming and going with all the grace and dignity of their race.

A man at a prayer platform rose to his feet, tightening his longyi around his waist. Portia stared at him. It was Simon Farrow.

They stepped out of the shadowed coverway over the stairs and into the blinding sunshine. Portia had never, never seen anything as elaborate, as intricate, and as bewilderingly diverse as the Shwe Dagon.

It was an unforgettable moment. The sweet smell of flowers and incense hung

over the area. Portia could hear the distant tinkle of the temple bells coming from the *hti*, the beautifully shaped umbrella that topped the pagoda. And what a pagoda it was! It was three-hundred-and-sixty feet of solid gold and precious jewels.

"I call that impressive!" Rex said. A man who had been seated at a prayer platform rose to his feet, tightening his *longyi* about his waist. Portia stared at him, unable to believe her eyes. The man was Simon Farrow.

"I thought you were coming alone," he greeted her. "I might have known you wouldn't be able to resist masculine society for long."

"Is that why you're lying in wait for me here?" she demanded. She wished he didn't look quite so male and in command of the situation.

"I came out of the goodness of my heart," he claimed. "I thought you might want to know something about the place."

Rex was obviously not pleased to have Simon as a guide. He huffed and puffed his way from one courtyard to another, acting as a counterpoint to Simon's explanations of what they were looking at.

"You've been here before!" Portia said to Simon.

He nodded. "I shouldn't be leading this expedition otherwise. The Burmese government wouldn't have let any old foreigner in on a project as important as recording the texts on the sacred stones at Kuthodaw."

She could well believe it. "In that dress you look Burmese yourself," she told him, laughing.

"It's more comfortable than a pair of trousers in this heat. I'm sorry if you don't approve."

She refused to meet the naked challenge in his eyes. She was wise enough to

be afraid of the effect he had on her in any garb.

She linked her arm through Rex's, using him as a defence against her own reactions to Simon Farrow.

"I'll need some photos of the temple, Rex," Simon said. Looking daggers at him, Rex left on his errand.

"What was that all about?" Portia asked angrily when Rex was out of earshot.

"He's a nice boy, Portia. I don't want him hurt."

"A boy!" she repeated with contempt. "I'll have you know he's at least as old as I am."

"He lacks your strength of mind and purpose. I won't have you upsetting his work by getting involved with him emotionally."

She glared at him. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. It could be we might become serious about each other!"

He shook his head in frank disbelief. "Rex isn't for you. You need a much firmer hand than his on the reins."

She opened her eyes very wide, marveling at his words. "I thought you Americans were so modern! Haven't you heard that women are looking for a partnership with the man of their choice these days, not a lord and master . . . ?"

"I don't object to that," he cut her off.

"You could have fooled me! What are we talking about then?"

"You! Rex is a likable young man and you can only hurt him!"

"Well, you can just mind your own business! I happen to like Rex, and I infinitely prefer his society to yours." She turned on her heel and walked away from him, her back straight and her head held high.

Rex found her a few minutes later. He put a friendly arm around her waist. She found herself clinging to him with an eagerness that brought a flush of pleasure

to his face. She wished she could find an equal pleasure in the contact, but there was none at all for her. Nevertheless, she welcomed his uncritical approval of her.

The members of the expedition assembled in Rangoon, and met each other for the first time. There was one other woman, an American named Esther Busbee. Portia liked her immediately, and the two of them, with Rex, lined up to get seats together on the plane for Mandalay.

"I prefer you should sit next to me, Portia," Simon's voice cut in. "Go ahead and find some seats for us, will you?"

"I want to talk to Esther."

"Esther can wait."

Simon was gone before she could argue further.

"Don't let the boss man aggravate you," Rex advised. "He's trying to look after you, that's all. Probably doesn't realise you're grown up now and able to choose your own friends."

"Let's hope it's only that," Portia sighed. "He never went in for these chivalrous gestures when he first knew me."

Rex grinned. "It suits me, darling girl. I much prefer he should view you with a paternal eye than have him as competition for your favours."

Portia found two seats near the back of the crowded plane. When Simon joined her she glared at him stonily.

"Are you still sulking at being parted from your swain?" he asked.

"I don't enjoy being kept on lead strings. And I wanted to sit with Esther."

"You mean you wanted to hold hands with Rex! Haven't I already told you he's not for you?"

She turned a cold shoulder on him, staring out at the shimmering airport as they took off.

Simon opened his briefcase and searched inside it for a couple of papers written in the familiar, curly Pali script.

"You can spend your time translating these," he said. "You should get them finished by the time we arrive in Mandalay."

The girl in the poem had been described in detail and with an intimacy that Simon had never experienced with her.

He began to read, ignoring her with a deliberation that annoyed her even more than had his previous high-handed manner.

She turned her attention to the papers he had given her to translate. She took a notebook and pen out from her handbag and began her translation of the Pali script before her. She found it was a love poem that had nothing whatever to do with the Buddhist scriptures she had come to translate. It was as outspoken as anything she had ever read.

"Where did you find this?" she asked when she had finished.

Simon's eyes crinkled with amusement. "I came across it back home and it reminded me of you. I thought you'd like it."

She was startled into dropping her pen. "I should hope it didn't remind you of me!" she observed when she had sufficiently recovered herself to say anything at all. The girl in the poem had been described in detail and with an intimacy that Simon had never experienced with her.

He laughed. "Your studies in the ancient languages should have made you less prudish, my dear. I need the translations for an article I'm writing. You needn't take them personally unless you want to."

Somehow or other he always managed to get the better of her. She, too, had been reminded of her younger self by the poem and she had been flattered to think he had compared the girl in the poem with herself. It was rather humiliating to discover that she still wanted his approval.

Simon looked out the window. "Something's wrong," he said. "We're setting down."

The aeroplane landed in an open field with a couple of official looking huts at one side.

The steward came over to Simon.

"You are leader of foreign expedition?"

Simon nodded. "What's happening?" he asked.

"We must take on board a wounded soldier on a stretcher. We must have seats for him. Two people from your party will have to stay behind. Very sorry, but you will find nice hotel at Taunggyi."

"Is that where we are now?"

The steward looked abashed. "This is Heho airport, sir. Very close to Nyaung Shwe, the most beautiful lake in Burma. A plane come tomorrow and take you to Mandalay or perhaps to Rangoon. Or maybe you find a lorry going to Pagan and fly from there to Mandalay. You will see much of our beautiful country that way!"

"I get the picture," Simon said.

Rex called out to Portia, "This is our opportunity to get to know each other better! Fancy staying behind with me?"

Portia felt Simon's disapproval settle like a cloud over her head. She smiled her most radiant smile. "It might be fun at that!" she murmured.

Simon's fingers fastened about her waist, yanking her out of her seat. "Miss Cochrane will stay behind with me. You'd better take your seats again while they bring the wounded soldier on board."

Portia tried to pry his fingers open, furiously angry. "I don't want to be left behind with you!"

"You were willing enough to stay behind with Rex," he reminded her.

She would have loved to have kicked his shins, but she was too proud to make a scene in front of the others.

As the plane took off, Simon folded his arms across his chest. "Who would have thought it would have taken five years for us to be alone together again?" he remarked. "Let's hope it'll be as enjoyable as it was last time."

She swallowed the old, remembered fear she had always felt in his company. "You went away readily enough," she reminded him.

"But I'm keeping you with me this time," he replied. And he kissed her lightly on the mouth, smiling as he did so.

It turned out, when they talked to the officials at the airstrip, that they could not get a plane out. Their only course was to take a bus to Taunggyi, then find some way to get to Pagan, where they could get a flight to Mandalay.

They joined a group of local people waiting for the bus. One man came over to them.

"You are visiting my country?" His English was excellent. He put his hands together and bowed slightly, introducing himself as Ko Chan Tha. "Whom do I have the honour of addressing?"

"Simon Farrow," Simon answered him, "and Portia Cochrane. We're waiting for the bus to take us to the lake."

"You'll have a long wait. May I suggest you accompany me to my sister's house? She lives on the edge of the lake. You'll find it much cooler in her house."

"How kind of you!" Portia exclaimed.

"I am on a visit to the village," Ko Chan Tha went on by way of explanation. "I live and work in Rangoon, but I like to

come home whenever I can."

He led the way to the oldest, most extraordinary vehicle Portia had ever seen. The body had been patched with wood until there was little of the original metal left. There was no dashboard, and the tires were bald and shiny with their lack of tread.

Ko Chan Tha turned on a tap in a rubber tube, allowing a little petrol to run out of the tank on the roof. "It'll only take a minute to start it now," he said. "Climb in and make yourselves at home."

"I can see why they use the airline bus for tourists," Portia muttered to Simon. "Most of them would think their last hour had come in a vehicle like this!"

"Would you have felt safer with Rex beside you?" he asked her.

She refused to answer. If she had been there with Rex she doubted anyone would have offered them a lift to their sister's home. It had always been the same with Simon, however. He was always made welcome wherever he went for he had that rare ability to be equally at home in a country cottage as he had been amongst the fellows of her father's college in Cambridge.

They pulled up at a small house by a canal that ran into the lake.

"Welcome to my sister's house!" Ko Than Cha said. "Come inside and she will make tea for us."

A young woman came out of the house and smiled shyly at them, her bright yellow skirt flapping against her legs in the light breeze.

"Please to come inside," she said.

"My sister, Ma Hla," Ko Chan Tha introduced her proudly.

The house was old, made entirely from teak wood, with panelled walls and a well-polished wooden floor. There was very little furniture.

They went into the kitchen, where Ma

Hla begged them to seat themselves.

Simon sat down beside Portia. "Feeling better?"

She had her hand on the table and he put his over hers, awakening memories. Simon had once sauntered into the kitchen, hot from the work he had undertaken in her father's garden. He had stripped down to the waist and her eyes had widened as she had taken in all that tanned, rippling flesh. When he had caught her looking at him, her cheeks had burned with embarrassment.

"How old are you, Portia?" he had asked then.

Her mouth had been dry. "Eighteen," she had answered. "Fully adult in the eyes of the law and in my own eyes!"

"How quickly do you want to grow up?" he had asked.

"I don't know," she had said.

That had been when he had put his hand over hers in exactly the way he was doing now.

"But not in your father's eyes," he had commented.

"I'll never be an adult in my father's eyes!" she had agreed.

He had turned her hand over, rubbing her palm with his thumb. It had been the most erotic sensation she had ever known, arousing an agony of feelings within her that she had been totally unprepared for.

"It's just my luck you're so inexperienced!" he had sighed.

"You could change that," she had pointed out.

He had lifted her hand to his mouth, touching his mouth to the centre of her

palm.

"How quickly do you want to grow up?" he had asked her.

She had stared down at her closed hand, the tears pricking the back of her eyes.

"I don't know," she had said.

Now, five years later, the same helpless agony afflicted her at his touch. She didn't feel a day more experienced than she had then. It wasn't just her hand she wanted him to hold. Her whole body longed for his caress, her breasts swelling with the remembered ecstasy of when he had taken her into his arms and roused her to the point when she had invited him into her bed.

She snatched her hand from beneath his as if he had stung her.

"Rex would have enjoyed being here!" she said in belligerent tones.

Simon put his head on one side. "Think so?" he drawled.

"Why do you dislike him?" she asked sharply. "I can't see anything wrong with him."

"That, my dear Portia, is obvious."

His mockery was not lost on their hosts. Ko Chan Tha leaned forward. "Couldn't it be you dislike this man because your wife likes him too much?"

"Could be," Simon admitted with a laugh.

Portia's jaw dropped. "I'm not Simon's wife!" she protested.

"No?" All eyes were on her reddening face. "Why did you stay behind here with him?"

Why indeed? Portia looked at Simon, expecting him to get her out of this unexpected difficulty.

"She was always destined to be my woman," he explained casually, an unmistakable twinkle in his eyes. "I chose her many years ago, but she wouldn't listen to me. That's the trouble with clever

women, they always think they know best!"

After tea, Ma Hla told Portia, "My husband will take you and your man in his boat this afternoon. He speaks a little English also and he will help you if you don't want to be alone with your American."

Portia flushed. "I work for him," she rushed to explain. "We're working in Mandalay, at Kuthodaw. The only reason I'm here is to translate the old Pali scriptures into English."

"Are you a nun that you can read Pali? You prefer to do that than to marry with the American?" Ma Hla looked completely scandalised.

"Portia hasn't been able to think of marriage," said Simon, coming to her rescue. She's been looking after her father all these years. Now she wants to get used to living her own life without him. He wanted her to come to Burma because he thought the break would be easier for them both that way."

Ma Hla's fine eyes opened wide. "Ah so," she murmured. "We must all travel the same way one day. Though for you this means sadness, no? For us it is only a new beginning and we refuse to be sad."

It was the first intimation Portia had had that Simon knew why her father had allowed her to come to Burma in his place. He had never admitted to her that he knew he was dying.

But how did Simon know? Her father had refused to have Simon's name mentioned in his presence these last few years.

Ma Hla's husband took them out on the lake. His ancient outboard motor sped the craft across the water, sending up a fine spray that wet their hair and faces and gave them the illusion of going much faster than the ancient motor had any chance of actually achieving.

Portia was entranced to see the local

fishermen maneuver their boats by wrapping one leg around an oar, thus leaving both their hands free for their nets.

"They have races that way, too," Simon told her.

"I'd love to see one," she said.

"It would be too far to come from Mandalay."

"I suppose so." She sighed. "If we ever get to Mandalay, I may not stay. I think I'd prefer to go home."

His hand closed on her shoulder. "You'll stay! You've nothing to feel sorry for yourself about!" he said sharply. "Your father thought it was what you wanted. He sent you to me!"

"As if I were no more than a tiresome parcel!"

something that he's let you off the leash at last, I suppose. It couldn't have been easy for him to let you go—especially to me!"

Portia frowned. "He has nothing to worry about now, has he? There's only a professional tie between us these days."

Again, she remembered the past.

"When is he coming back?" she had pleaded with her father, unbelieving that Simon had left without a single word for her.

"I don't suppose he will," Dr. Cochrane had told her crossly. "Pull yourself together, Portia!

He could have said goodbye to her. He could have written to her once or twice. He could have said *something*, something that would have taken away the bitter taste of the certainty he'd been glad to forget all about her the minute he'd turned his back on Cambridge.

"I'm older now," she said. "I've learned a lot since then. I was schooled in the art of bearing disappointments bravely from an early age. You might say I was taught by an expert!" She smiled sweetly at him.

"Don't push your luck too far, Portia," he recommended to her. "You're not eighteen any longer and this time your father can't protect you!"

Her eyes flashed. "Am I asking protection from anyone?"

"I reckon you are a bit of a tease," he said tautly, "and you've always had a magic that no other girl has ever had for me. I don't have to remind you surely, that it's a long way to Mandalay from here. There was always that something between us but you never had any intention of delivering what you pretend to offer, did you? What would you have done if I had accepted your invitation?

"I don't know what you are talking about!" she said stiffly.

***"Don't push your luck, Portia.
You're not eighteen anymore
and this time your father can't
protect you!"***

He stared into her eyes. "Was I wrong to think you might have grown up a bit in the last five years? You thought yourself indispensable to your father then. I thought you might have learned better?"

She shrugged away from his touch. "I don't remember having much choice," she said dryly. "You both thought of me as a child and made your arrangements accordingly."

"Is that how it seemed to you? Is that really how you remember it?"

Portia bit her lip. "Yes, it is."

Simon's face was impassive. "What reason did he give you for sending you out here in his place?"

"That it would further my career."

Simon's smile was wry. "It's

"Should I refresh your memory? Well, then I can remember an afternoon in Cambridge when you'd have given me anything I chose to take. You said..."

"That was a long time ago! And you went away!"

"And you did nothing about it, did you? If you'd wanted, you could have come too!" He gave her an impatient look. "What are you afraid of now?" he scoffed. "You've grown even more desirable over the years and you still want to be kissed by me, don't you, Portia?"

"I'm not in the mood to play games right now," she claimed, wishing the knot of despair in her stomach would magically disappear.

He stared deep into her eyes, "I won't wait forever," he said at last.

Her eyes met his and she flushed scarlet. She longed to fling herself into his arms and let the consequences take care of themselves.

"Your father thought you a child," Simon said suddenly. "There are few things your father and I are likely to agree about, and women are not one of them. Don't make the mistake of confusing my needs with his—they're not the same thing at all!"

They put ashore at one of the other inhabited islands close by, coming to rest in a small backwater. They were taken to a large building which housed the village factory. Downstairs was a selection of hand-made bags and embroidered slippers.

It was the second room which caught and held Portia's attention, however. Great bales of handwoven silk glimmered against the dark wood of the floor. Colours of the rainbow, cascades of pinks and yellows, scarlets, greens, and blues, some of them patterned with the motifs of flowers, others with geometrical designs, flowed over the floor.

On the loom at that moment was a piece of cloth in pink and cream, the warp of one colour, the weft of the other.

"Imagine a full length dress in that!" she exclaimed to Simon, but he had disappeared into another room of the factory, leaving her to make her own way behind him.

Simon was waiting for her when she got back to the boat. He had a package under his arm, which he threw into her lap as she settled herself in the bottom of the boat.

She was quite overcome as she tore a corner off the paper wrappings. "Oh, Simon, not silk for me?"

"I've always had a fancy to see you in silk," he said, smiling as he leaned across the boat to kiss her full on the mouth.

Portia could feel her heartbeat quicken. Try as she would, she could not in all honesty deny any longer to herself that she was as much in love with Simon now as she had been five years ago. Only this time, she knew that it was a once-and-for-always kind of love from which she would never recover. And how to keep this knowledge from him, she hadn't a clue.

"Thank you, Simon," she finally managed. "I've never had a silk dress before."

"It's high time you did, then," he replied with more than a touch of masculine self-satisfaction. "It's time for many things that you haven't had, Miss Portia Cochrane!"

They continued to Taunggyi that evening in the back of the Burma Air bus, sharing a seat that would scarcely have been adequate for one European-sized person.

Portia was tired. The bubble of happiness had long ago dissipated into an ache of longing she could feel in her bones. She should never have allowed that moment of delight to brim over into

laughter and an invitation she was sure that Simon must have noticed. She wished she were safely in Mandalay with Rex—nice, safe Rex, who would never take advantage of a weak moment when her defences were down.

"What will we do if there's no room at the hotel?" she asked in prickly tones.

"I expect they'll find a room for us."

"Two rooms! I insist on having my own room! I'm not going to share with you!"

He shifted into a more comfortable position. "What makes you think I want to share a room with you?"

His words were like a splash of cold water, depriving her of breath. "You said you wanted to five years ago!"

"So I did. You were pretty clear about what you wanted to, as I remember it."

Again, she envisioned the scene. The sight of him made her feel weak inside and her senses had swum in the most alarming way. She had clung onto the door handle as if her life had depended on it.

***"I want to make love to you
and spend the night with you.***

"Then why don't you...?"

"I'll think about it."

"Are you all right?" he had asked her.

She had tried to say something back, something light and amusing, but there had been no hope of that. She had gone on staring at him as though she had never seen him before and, in a way, she hadn't. She had never seen anyone before quite like that. She had been aware of every muscle in his body, every hair on his head.

"Do you have to go at once?" she had asked him abruptly. "I'll get us both

something to eat, if you like?"

He had been quiet when they had finished eating. She had been sure it had been because he'd found her boring, tongue-tied and awkward as she had been all evening.

"I wish every day could be like this one!" she had broken the silence.

The look in his eyes had brought colour to her face. "It wouldn't be enough for every day," he had said abruptly.

Something in his tone of voice had made her feel quite sick with anxiety.

"Why wouldn't it be enough?" she had whispered, rubbing her hands up and down over her knees.

His lips had curved into a smile of wry amusement. "Because I want to make love to you and stay the night with you."

His words knocked the breath out of her, leaving a painful vacuum in her middle.

"Then why don't you?" she had said . . .

"I'll think about it," he had said. And presumably he had thought about it before he had chosen to leave her without a single word of goodbye. There was nothing he could do now that would ever, ever make up to her for the anguish she had suffered at his going.

In the morning, Simon hired a truck to take them to Pagan.

"When will we arrive?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "We may have to camp overnight. We'll pick up supplies at the market."

The market at Taunggyi was a colorful, teeming sight. But it was the jewelry stalls that fascinated Portia the most. The merchants displayed piles of gems of every type and hue, and were willing to make up a brooch, a ring, or an intricate necklace then and there.

"Want one?" Simon asked her as she

lingered beside a group of sapphires.

Portia gave him a startled look. "No, no, I don't!"

His eyes explored every inch of her. "It's too late to worry whether a gift from me will compromise you, Portia. I compromised you a long time ago!"

She thrust her chin upwards in an angry movement. "I don't remember it that way!"

He put an arm about her, hurrying her onwards, back to the main road. "Your father thought otherwise." A spark of malice shone in his eyes. "What will he have to say to this adventure, do you think?"

"He'll know I had no choice," she said doubtfully.

"He wouldn't like it, would he?" Simon mocked her. "So much for your making your own decisions, my girl. You quake at the mere thought of having to tell him you've been running round loose with me."

She faced him bravely. "He has a lot of respect for your work," she told him primly. "He thinks you very clever."

"It was his idea I should come to Burma," she said tartly. "He thought more highly of my achievements than you did."

"I never took the time to notice," he admitted. "You had other things to recommend you. I had only to look at you to want to make love to you, whereas all you wanted was to play at grown-up games without having to take any of the consequences. This time, my sweet, I shan't be above bending the rules to my own advantage. You should be the last one to blame me for that!"

Which didn't bode well for her immediate future, she thought. But she wasn't as angry as she thought she should have been. Curious, yes, excited, very, but for some reason that was totally beyond her, angry she was not.

They boarded the truck, and began their trek.

It grew steadily hotter as they left the hills behind and set off across the flatter plains, a ribbon of rutted road ahead of them as far as the eye could see. They pulled in for the first break of the day at a small village. The driver stretched himself out under a tree and fell fast asleep. Simon and Portia made a picnic with some of their supplies.

"It was your choice I left when I did. I would have come back if you'd shown any signs of wanting me to."

"Why didn't you write?" he asked her suddenly.

She pursed her lips together, remembering with bitterness how many times she had started a letter to him only to tear it up in disgust with herself for her lack of pride.

"Why didn't you?" she countered.

"I wanted to know if I meant anything to you first. It didn't take you long to forget all about me, did it?"

"My father said you were glad to get away from me. I could hardly write after that, not when I knew you thought of me as a silly child. I thought you'd decided I was too young for you. You could have said goodbye though. It wouldn't have cost you anything."

He studied her face with an intentness that made her move restively beneath his gaze. "It was your choice I left when I did," he said at last. "I would have come back if you'd given any sign of wanting me to."

"How was I expected to know that?"

His eyes grew brilliant as he looked at her. "A pity our driver had to choose such a public place to stop. If we had a little privacy I'd take you back five years with pleasure to where we left off then."

"Heaven forbid!" she denied with energy. "I wouldn't be five years younger again for anything!"

"That's what I want to hear!" he congratulated her. "Now that you've grown up, I'd say there's no reason why we shouldn't share a few magic moments together, with no strings attached and no recriminations when it's over. Is that a prospect which appeals?"

"No."

"You were willing enough before," he reminded her.

"That isn't fair!" she protested. She was sufficiently upset to tell the truth. "All I thought about was how marvellous you were. You gave me so much and I had nothing to offer you in return. I wasn't beautiful, or clever, or anything. I wanted to make you happy, that was all. I wanted to please you so you'd stay a little longer. What a silly little fool I was!"

"And now?"

"Now?" A painful bubble burst in her chest and her heart beat so quickly she thought she was going to faint. "I don't feel anything about you now!"

"I still want to make love to you!"

She shrugged her shoulders. "That's your problem, not mine."

His eyes dazzled her, muddling her thoughts. He came closer until his lips met hers, forcing a response that shattered her hard-won composure and had her clinging to him with an eagerness that shamed her. His hands travelled down her back, pulling her more firmly against him until she could be in no doubt that his excitement was more than equal to her own.

"Well, Portia?" he murmured, releasing her and moving away from her. "If

that was indifference—"

"What makes you think I want to have anything more to do with you than that?" she demanded.

"Oh you want it, my dear. The only doubt is if you want it enough. You're a fully grown woman now. There'll be no half measures. Your father isn't here for you to hide behind. This time there'll be only you and me—"

"There isn't going to be a this time!"

He looked very much as though he would have liked to strike her. "Good heavens, Portia, don't you understand yet? I thought I meant something to you. I would have married you if you'd followed me to the States, did you know that? Now, I mean to have you on my own terms, a pleasant diversion while we're working in Burma, and then you'll go your way and I'll go mine!"

She shut her eyes, closing out the sight of him. "You didn't say anything about marriage."

"I said more than enough. What about the message I left with your father?"

Her bewilderment might have told him something, but he was not looking at her. He had withdrawn into a world of his own, a world of which she knew nothing. What message had he left with her father? Was it possible her father had deliberately withheld a message from her?

When Dr. Cochrane had returned that night, Simon had gone, but she had been just as he had left her, her clothes still askew from the passion of their kisses. She had met her father's inquiries with a juvenile defiance. Had she been to bed with Simon? That was the only thing he had wanted to know, and she hadn't bothered to deny it. It hadn't seemed important in the face of Simon's refusal to stay with her. All she had been able to think about was the way he had pushed her away from him and had got up and

gone without a word, leaving her frantic with the knowledge that somehow, in some way, his going must have been her own stupid fault.

Her father had given her a stern warning not to think about Simon anymore.

"I will deal with that young man myself," he had declared. If there had been any message for her, he would have been the last one to have delivered it in the mood he had been in.

"My father thought of me as a child, and so did you!"

"Your father knew I was a threat to his plans for you and didn't want you to be distracted by an affair with me."

She waited anxiously for what was coming next. Would he choose to make love to her in such a public place?

Portia averted her face. "I think he thought we were having one," she confessed.

"What? Is that what you told him?" Simon groaned aloud. "How could you? If you knew what it cost me to get up and leave you! I wonder he didn't take a horsewhip to us both!"

"He was very kind. He told me to put you right out of my mind and that I wasn't to blame myself in any way. It seemed pretty good advice, especially as I never saw you again. If I'd needed confirmation that you didn't care about me, I was finally convinced when you left without even bothering to say goodbye or even leave a message."

Simon spread his hand in the dust. "Is that so? Well you won't forget me this time, I promise you that!"

Portia forced a shaky smile. "Promises, promises," she said lightly. "I keep telling you *there isn't going to be a this time.*"

The driver awoke from his nap, and summoned them back to the truck.

They drove until the night, then stopped at a small village with no inn or hotel. A local family gave them a place to wash up, and then they camped out under a bo-tree with leaves that shivered in the breeze and set Portia's nerves on edge.

"Don't worry," Simon told her. "It's said the leaves tremble in awe at the honour done to it by the Lord Buddha being enlightened in its shadow. They do it all the time."

He spread the blankets and she lay down gingerly on the pile nearest the fire. She turned her back on him and tried to still the pounding of her heart as he lay down beside her. With a muffled sound of exasperation, he reached out for her, pulling her close up against him.

She waited anxiously for what was coming next, but she could feel his muscles relaxing into sleep and she found it hard not to laugh out loud at her own foolishness. Was it likely that he would choose to make love to her in such a public place? She felt clean and comfortable and the shaking leaves above no longer disturbed her. Burrowing her head into Simon's shoulder she instantly fell asleep.

Before she knew it, he was blowing lightly into her ear. "Wake up, love, we'll have to be on our way in a little while."

Portia wakened slowly. It was warm and comfortable lying against him and she wriggled closer still, not wanting to break the contact between them.

"If you do that again I won't be responsible for my actions! Which do you want to do, go on to Pagan, or stay here and make love?"

"Go on to Pagan!"

She pulled herself upright, dismayed to discover the shirt she was wearing had risen up in the night revealing far more of her to Simon than she considered proper.

"It was a pleasant experience to sleep with a woman in my arms again," he remarked smugly.

She frowned. "How long has it been? A week or two?"

"You sound like a jealous woman, Portia Cochrane. Do my habits bother you?"

"I couldn't care less what you do!"

She stalked off across the courtyard, leaving him to follow. How dare he suggest she was jealous? She had never given a thought to the other women in his life. They had never been real people to her at all. She had known that he hadn't been celibate all these years, but she had done her best to dismiss him from her mind and heart as a matter of survival.

So why should she be jealous now? Was it because she had discovered the comfort of being close to him, without any of the hectic passion she had expected to flare up between them? She had felt his hands on her body and it had seemed quite natural to her.

She went back to the villagers' house to wash up again.

The young wife greeted her with joy, clearing the bathroom of a multitude of children as if by magic and promising her some kind of a meal in the kitchen after she had finished washing.

"Will you reach Pagan today?" she asked her.

Portia nodded, still busy with her own disturbing thoughts. "I hope so!"

The young woman laughed softly, brushing a fallen leaf off Portia's hair. "Your man gave you a good night?" she teased. "Your happiness is written on your face! It's very good to please your

husband, no?"

Portia gasped out some kind of an affirmative and made a dash for the privacy of the bathroom. If Simon had wanted to make love to her last night, would she have refused him? Her flesh tingled at the thought. At this rate she would never hold out until they got to Mandalay! *Oh, Simon, she thought, what am I to do?*

Portia was eating when Simon came to find her. The sight of him destroyed her hard-won composure and her hand shook as she took another spoonful of rice and dried fish, washing it down with tiny cups of fragrant tea.

Simon accepted a cup of tea also, his eyes on Portia's heightened colour. The wife threw a remark to him over her shoulder in the local dialect, her tongue appearing as a pretty pink tip between pearly teeth. Simon threw back his head and laughed, making an answer that sent her into a twitter of excitement.

"What did you say?" Portia demanded. "Was it something about me?"

She lifted her chin in a proud gesture. "I forgot about you once. I can easily do so again!"

He ran a finger down her cheek, smiling. "We were agreeing that I'm a lucky man."

"She must have said something more than that," she protested.

He forced her chin up, kissing her lightly on the lips, and preventing her from shrugging away from him with a touch of his hand. "She finds it strange that your happiness in me should embarrass you. She thinks we're a fine looking couple!"

"Much she knows about it!" she said caustically.

Simon's eyes looked deep into hers. "Is she so wrong?" he asked her.

Portia refused to answer.

"Oh, Portia," he said softly, "why won't you admit you want to be mine?"

She lifted her chin in a proud gesture. "I forgot all about you once. I can quite easily do so again!"

His eyes lit with derisive laughter. "Can you indeed? My poor girl; you hadn't forgotten me any more than I had forgotten you! Why else did you come to Burma?"

She winced, conscious of their interested audience. "You know why. I came in my father's place."

She gave him a defiant look. There had to be some way of persuading him that the only reason she had come was to further her career. There had to be some way of persuading herself!

"I wish we were going to Mandalay today!" she exclaimed. "It'll be nice to see Rex and the others again."

"You won't be seeing him today," he said firmly. "And meanwhile I'll be close beside you every inch of the way!"

They reached Pagan that afternoon. It was twelve square miles of dry, scrubby land, filled with some five thousand temples and monasteries in various states of repair. It is said that when the city was founded, round about the time of William the Conqueror, there had been trees all around, but they had all been cut down to provide fuel for making the thousands of bricks required for the building and that alone had changed the local climate for all time. It was already hot and rainless when Pagan fell victim to the marauding hordes of Kublai Khan, and it would be hot and rainless forever.

Situated on the east bank of the Irrawaddy, it stretched for as far as the eye can see, the red dust broken only by the mounds of brick that marked yet another

ruined pagoda. Only a few, such as the renovated golden Shwezigon Pagoda and the white-washed Gawdawpalin Temple stood out from the rest. Most important of all, was the magnificent Ananda Temple in freshly painted white, with a spire of gold and a museum dedicated to the glories of the Paganese past.

Yet this first sight of Pagan was partly an illusion. Most of the people still lived in thatched houses built on stilts, making living amongst the broken monuments, the descendants of those who had always lived there, and who had once raised up this whole mighty city at the command of their kings.

"We'll take you to the new hotel," the truck driver offered. "They're probably expecting you."

The hotel was the most modern of any in Burma. The bedrooms were situated in chalets in the newly cultivated gardens, joined by paths to the hotel.

Each chalet had four rooms which neatly dovetailed into one another, with their own verandah and entrance looking to the four points of the compass. A bellboy opened the first door for Portia, and the second for Simon.

Simon walked out onto the verandah, hands on hips, looking across the river to the mauve range of mountains beyond. "What a pity there isn't a connecting door!" he threw wryly over his shoulder and sauntered off down the steps and round the corner to his own room.

"Simon," she began...

He paused, glancing up at her with enigmatic eyes. "Yes?"

She changed her mind. "Nothing. I just wondered, it was fun last night, in a way, wasn't it?"

"It was a beginning," he said.

She wished she knew what he was really thinking. Had he any affection left for her after five years, or did he just desire her as

a woman?

"I shall miss being out in the open tonight," she said, almost without thinking.

"You don't have to sleep alone in Pagan," he said dryly. "This time I shan't refuse your invitation, Portia dearest."

Her eyes widened, her cheeks hot with embarrassment. That wasn't what she had meant! She didn't want any relationship that was here today and gone tomorrow and that was all he was offering her. That was all he had wanted from her ever since her arrival in Burma.

"I shan't be inviting you to anything," she muttered, fighting the lump of tears in her throat.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Still playing safe? That's fine by me. I shan't be asking you for anything either."

The tears ran down her cheeks and she turned her face away to hide them from him. When she had regained control of herself he was gone.

Portia flung herself on the bed. The tears had gone, to be replaced by an aching longing for Simon that made her feel physically ill.

She was lying on the bed when she heard a knock. She went to the door and threw it open.

The man on the other side of the door held his arms wide, a delighted grin on his face. "Pleased to see me?" he prompted her as she stood, staring at him, stricken by surprise.

"Rex!" she whispered.

"In the flesh, darling! I flew down from Mandalay the instant I heard you were likely to fetch up here. We can fly back together tomorrow. How's that for enterprise?"

She tried to force a smile of welcome. "You look marvellously well, Portia," Rex said. "I would have found all those hours in Dr. Farrow's company daunting,

to say the least. Still, that's all over now I'm here. Care to take a quick look round Pagan while you have the opportunity? We'll be back in good time for dinner."

Portia hesitated. "What about Simon?"

"What about him? Haven't you had enough of him getting here?"

"Yes," she said baldly. It wasn't true but she hoped Rex believed it. She didn't want anyone to know what a fool she was about Simon.

"Then give him the go-by and come with me!"

Portia was tempted. Rex's undemanding admiration was exactly what she needed right now.

"All right," she said. "But you'll have to wait outside while I change my clothes."

Rex's face fell. "You mean you're in love with him? Well, I can't admire your taste. Perhaps you'd rather I hadn't come."

He grinned, pleased with himself. "I knew you'd come. I've ordered some kind of a horse-drawn vehicle to take us on a round trip of the temples and the lacquer factory. Doesn't that make you feel better?"

"I must tell Simon that we're going, Rex," she warned him.

"Not likely! He might want to come too!"

"I have to ask him."

"Why? We both want to be alone together and you've already had an excess of Farrow's company. Why do you have to drag him along now?" He pushed his way past the door standing an inch or two closer to her than she liked. She felt crowded and, suddenly, longed to be rid of him. "Has he already staked his claim, Portia? Has he?" he demanded.

She took a deep breath, wondering how to answer. "In a way," she admitted. "He—I—we knew each other years ago!"

Rex gave her a look of disgust. "That doesn't mean anything! You couldn't be serious about him!"

Portia thrust her fists into her pockets. "Why not?" she asked.

Rex's face fell. "You mean you're in love with him? Well, I can't admire your taste! Perhaps you'd rather I hadn't come?"

Portia sighed. "It isn't like that either," she protested feebly.

She looked over Rex's shoulder and, as in a bad dream, Simon came up the three steps onto her verandah. The sight of him reminded her how very deeply she had fallen in love with him. If he were ever to walk out on her again...

"If it isn't like that, supposing you tell us both how it is," Simon invited her, his head on one side and his eyes on fire with challenge.

Portia turned on her heel and went inside her room, closing the door behind her. She could hear the murmur of the men's voices as they spoke to one another. Simon, *Simon, SIMON!* Blast Simon! She might never come to Pagan again so why should she deny herself the opportunity to see something of it because of him? Let him come, if he liked, or let him stay behind, it was all the same to her!

Both Rex and Simon accompanied her in the end. Simon was tight-lipped and sullen, a grave disappointment to Portia,

who missed his usual steady flow of easily digested information. Rex, on the other hand, who had done nothing but talk ever since they had all left the hotel, had no information to offer at all. He was even more ignorant than Portia was herself about all things Burmese.

At the Ananda Temple, built in 1090 A. D., she gazed at a colossal standing Buddha. Some thirty feet high, he was cleverly lit by some concealed skylights, which revealed his smiling face and the full beauty of this astonishing statue. Portia stood lost in the wonder of the moment.

"Another colossal Buddha!" groaned Rex, hurrying ahead, then pausing briefly to examine a fresco.

"Shall we go on to the museum?" Simon's voice sounded cool, even ironic, and Portia noticed he addressed the question to her rather than to Rex.

"I'd like to," she said diffidently.

"It's just clutter, darling," Rex protested. "Let's move on to the lacquer village."

Simon raised his brows. "Portia?"

"If Rex wants to move on..." she began.

Simon's rock hard expression softened a little. "Rex can wait outside. As you rightly pointed out earlier you may never come this way again."

He led the way into the little museum at one side of the temple. She followed, a little uncomfortable about ignoring Rex's wishes.

Once inside the museum, however, she forgot all about Rex. Simon went to a great deal of trouble to explain to her the objects on view, paying particular attention to the replica of Buddha's footprint, with its many lines and special signs, pointing out to her what each of them meant.

Rex's boredom only increased every moment they lingered until he could hard-

ly contain himself and yawned openly, not even bothering to disguise his dislike of Simon's eye for detail.

"Let's go!" he urged Portia.

She smiled at him. "Don't you long to photograph some of these things?" she humoured him.

"No. I'd rather use up my film on you, my love. If I could only get you to myself, I'd show you how easily you could inspire me to do some of my best work ever!"

"It wouldn't pay very well," she pointed out.

"That all you know! I'm mainly a cheesecake photographer, and it pays a great deal better than all this Eastern rubbish!"

Portia made a face at him. "I've never thought of myself as cheesecake."

"I can't see you enjoying a lot of men you don't know drooling over your photograph," said Simon.

Portia lifted her chin to a belligerent angle. "I might, if I thought that anyone would drool over me."

Rex gave her a funny, tight little smile. "You have us all drooling now. Where've you been all your life that you don't recognise the signs?"

"Her father put a spell on her and sent her to sleep, like Rip Van Winkle."

"He did not! My father only wanted what's best for me! He wanted me to be a person in my own right."

"By being his faithful shadow?" Simon interrupted.

"It was better than being yours!"

She was horrified the instant she had said it. Horrified by what Rex would think and even more horrified by what Simon's reaction might be. She could feel herself blushing to the ears. "I only meant . . ." she started to explain.

"Yes, what did you mean?" Simon asked her.

"That I can always earn my own living

with my degree," she mumbled. "I don't have to depend on anyone else for a meal ticket. I can make my own way in the world."

"If that's what you want," Simon said dryly.

*"I've been hearing about
Simon's reputation with
women, and it's not pretty.
You're lucky you escaped
unscathed."*

Rex sat beside her when they got back into the horse-drawn carriage that was the only local form of conveyance. He held her hand, rubbing his thumb up and down her palm.

Simon left her alone with Rex when they came to the next temple.

"Back in a minute," he said cheerfully, using his long legs to the full to walk briskly up to the entrance of the broken-down, brick coloured pagoda.

"Thank goodness for that!" said Rex.

Portia took her hand out of his. She didn't really like being alone with Rex.

"I wish you wouldn't annoy Simon," she said.

"Don't worry about Simon, Portia, my love. I've been hearing all about his reputation with women and it doesn't make very pretty hearing. That you should have come out of your trip with him unscathed was your good luck. He hasn't spared many of your sex in the past."

"I don't wish to hear."

"You should listen to Esther talking about him!"

"Why? What does she say?"

"She says he can twist any female

round his little finger. I think she's a little bit in love with him herself."

"Would that be so surprising?" Portia asked him sourly.

Rex looked surprised. "No," he said at last. "But I don't envy any girl who falls in love with him. That man is dangerous!"

"Rubbish!" Portia retorted. She was really angry now. "He's not at all dangerous. He's clever and rather a darling."

Rex burst out laughing. "He wouldn't recognise himself from that description! Could it be you're a little bit smitten yourself?"

Portia opened her eyes wide in horror. "Me?"

"I thought not," Rex grinned complacently. "If he hadn't known you all those years ago, I doubt he'd have noticed you now. Leave him to Esther and you can concentrate yourself all on me. That's a much better idea!"

Portia didn't answer. Her eyes blurred as she thought of the hopelessness of her position. Perhaps Rex was right and she should settle for what she could get.

Simon looked curiously at her set face when he jumped back into the horsedrawn vehicle. "Rex been giving you all the gossip from Mandalay?" he asked her.

She sniffed, feeling more miserable than ever. "Something like that," she said.

"Good. How's Esther?"

"You should have taken *her* with you!" Rex told him sharply. "She'd have been willing enough!"

"But not able enough," Simon returned, unperturbed.

"I thought you liked her?" Portia said with a timidity she despised in herself.

"I do. Esther in New York, or even in Mandalay, is an admirable person. Esther

alone and lost in the Burmese hinterland is quite another matter. I preferred a younger companion."

"More nubile?" Rex suggested with malice.

"That too," Simon agreed. "Portia did very well. Shall we get lost in the jungle together again sometime, my sweet?"

Portia wanted to go away by herself and cry the misery out, until she felt nothing more for Simon Farrow than she did for any other passing acquaintance.

"I'd rather not," she said.

His eyes were bright as he leaned towards her. "Did I disappoint you in some way?"

She fanned her hot face with her hat. "Perhaps it was mutual," she suggested.

He bent his head towards her in an intimate gesture which made her bones melt within her. "What was mutual?" he asked gently.

They came to the lacquer village, so-called because the entire place was given over to the production of lacquer work. Except for the pigs, that is. There were pigs everywhere, roaming about the roads and wallowing in the mud puddles around the village pump. They were brown, with large floppy ears and a penchant for sunning themselves in unexpected places, congregating on the paths and watching with calm eyes as the human beings struggled to get their ancient vehicles around them.

Outside some of the houses were piles of basket work waiting to be dipped into the lacquer that would make them firm and bring up the high polish of the finished article. Some objects could have as many as forty coats of lacquer applied before the final pure gold embellishments were added to give the last touch of luxury to another beautiful, handmade product.

"Think of the money they could make if they mechanised and sought out some world wide markets!" Rex exclaimed.

Portia wondered if they weren't happier as they were, working together in a project in which the whole village could join in, even the children.

Tea was offered to them in the room that doubled as a shop where one could buy some of the objects on display. Rex flung himself into one of the easy chairs, making gestures for Portia to sit on the arm beside him. Reluctantly she did so, torn between a desire to scare off Simon and an equally strong desire not to encourage Rex. She seemed to have lost on both counts as Simon drifted away to the other side of the room and Rex put an arm about her waist and squeezed her in a way she found to be more than a little offensive.

Where men were concerned it didn't seem to matter how good one's intentions were, she thought wearily. One couldn't win.

"Are you going to allow me to share your room tonight?" he asked her.

She pushed his arm away. "Certainly not!"

He patted her arm. "I didn't fly down here for nothing, you know. I thought you'd be pleased to see me?"

"I was. I mean I am, in a way. I don't play games though, Rex. I never have and I don't want to now."

"Except with the boss," Rex suggested nastily.

Portia sat up very straight, pushing his hand away again. "There's been nothing like that, and there won't be! Just because

we work together . . ."

"I thought you liked me," Rex went on just as if she hadn't spoken.

"I do *like* you."

"Then why won't you?"

Portia stood up, her feathers decidedly ruffled. "Oh, for heaven's sake, Rex. The answer is no. Can't you get that through your thick head?"

He looked like a hurt little boy, a small boy with a strong vindictive streak in his nature. "If you didn't want to play, why did you imply you did? It cost me plenty to come down here, and it isn't my way to pay out good money without getting a decent return on it!"

He sounded more sulky than vicious, Portia decided, so she smiled brightly at him and said, "Too bad. I didn't ask you to come!"

"Pity you didn't make it clear before!" he retorted. "I won't forgive you for this! You wanted Farrow all the time, didn't you?"

Portia took a deep breath. "Perhaps," she said. She blinked as she saw the naked hatred in his eyes. Where men were concerned it didn't seem to matter how good one's intentions were, she thought wearily, one couldn't win with them.

She strolled over to where Simon was standing, forcing herself to concentrate on the range of beautiful objects before her.

"Turned him down, have you?" Simon remarked, not looking at her. "You shouldn't have made him believe that that was what you wanted. What reason did you give him for not going through with it?"

"That I never said I would! I never encouraged him at all!"

Simon glared down at her. "I really think you believe that!" he said at last.

Her eye fell on a little lacquer box shaped like a duck, more gold than black.

"I'm going to buy this," she announced, trying to change the subject.

Simon took it from her. "I'll buy it for you as a souvenir," he offered.

"No, I'll buy it myself! I'm not going to be beholden to you for anything!"

"Beholden?" he mocked. "Where did you learn such a word? One duck won't make any difference to your fate!"

"I'm not prepared to take a chance on it."

He smiled then, dangling the duck in front of her eyes. "I want you, Portia, and you want me. Name your price!"

"I'm not for sale!"

"Not even for a wedding ring?"

She swallowed down the lump in her throat. It wasn't a ring she wanted, she wanted his heart! "You can only have me with love," she managed, "and you haven't any love to offer."

He put his head on one side and she caught the amusement briefly in his eyes. "How do you know?" he asked.

"I was born knowing," she answered him sadly. She reached up and snatched the duck back from him.

Later, at the hotel, she examined her purchase.

"Have a look inside," Simon suggested.

It fell open at a touch and a flash of blue fire fell out on her knee. There was no mistaking one of the precious Burmese sapphires and her eyes went straight to Simon's face.

"I can't accept it!" she said.

"Then throw it away," he said off-handedly.

She clutched it to her, shocked by the very idea.

"Why, Simon?" she asked softly.

"If you were as grown up as you pretend you'd know why. Let's go look at the sunset."

Simon led her right down to the banks

of the water to where some rose beds had been planted, sweet smelling and old fashioned in their heavy, single blooms.

"Kiss me, Portia," he invited her.

She trembled. "Rex will be wondering where we are," she demurred.

Simon made an impatient sound. "One of these days I'll wring your silly little neck! Forget about Rex, can't you?"

The sun sank, growing to an enormous size, like a great scarlet balloon settling on the horizon. All around it the sky was streaked with colour, ever changing, ever growing more vivid, until it finally died away leaving only the purple, tropical night.

Simon put out a hand to her and she went willingly into his arms. She had no thought for the future when he kissed her. Her whole being was filled with the scent and touch of him. She couldn't get enough of him.

Simon pulled her closer still. "You can count the sapphire as a down payment on this," he said in her ear. "I want you even more now than I did five years ago!"

Portia wrenched herself away from him, her heart sick within her.

"Then want must be your master!" she cried out furiously, and ran away from him the whole way through the hotel gardens, back to her chalet and the privacy of her room.

Simon knocked on her door a short while later.

"Are you upset?" he asked when he saw her tear-stained cheeks.

"I suppose I can cry if I want to without having to ask your permission. I'm not for sale and you don't own me, even if you are my employer."

"I could have had you that night in Cambridge!"

"You didn't try to buy me then! I don't accept jewelry from strange men!"

To her indignation he began to laugh.

"How you do exaggerate! Since when was I a stranger to you?"

She was shocked into a kind of honesty. "I've never known you. Sometimes I think I imagined you—gave you qualities you never had. You're not real at all! I thought you were something different, something which you aren't. I thought my father was wrong about you, but he wasn't. Well, I'm not going to be another scalp for you to hang on your belt!"

"Would you object if I made love to you now?" he asked.

"I should hate you for it," she told him solemnly.

"Good," he said.

She was confused. "Good?"

"I've never bought a woman's favours. That removes one misunderstanding between us."

He ran his lips across her eyes and down to her lips, kissing her with a lightness of touch that made her want to plead for more.

"We have each other now." He put his hand over the agitated beating of her heart. "You need loving, Portia. We both need each other!"

"You managed very well without me for the last five years!" she said tartly. "You can go on managing!"

"And did you manage without me?"

"I was too young for it to matter," she claimed, hoping she would be forgiven the downright lie.

"Is that why you didn't follow me to the States?"

"No," she admitted. "I didn't think you wanted me."

"And now?"

"It's as I said, we want different things. Now please go."

He looked at her searchingly. "Portia, when you do change your mind, I'll have you on your knees begging me to make love to you, and to give you back your sapphire!"

She raised her eyebrows in outrage. "I'd never beg for a sapphire!"

"Never is a long time, my dear!"

He closed the door so quietly behind him that she couldn't believe he had really gone. She broke into tears again.

"Oh Simon!" she sobbed. "It isn't a sapphire I want from you. All I shall ever want from you is your love!"

That was their last private moment before the plane took them to Mandalay.

Esther Busbee met them at the airport. It was clearly Simon she was waiting for and she could hardly wait for him to pick his suitcase out of the pile that was being unloaded from the hold before she had flung herself into his arms.

"Miss me?" Simon asked.

"You don't know how much! Something came up."

"What?"

The American woman cast a meaningful look in Portia's direction. "Not now, darling."

"Don't mind me!" Portia said sarcastically. She fought against the pangs of sheer jealousy that Esther Busbee's easy management of Simon induced in her.

"We-ell," Esther murmured doubtfully, "I suppose someone has to tell you. I just thought you'd prefer it to be Simon, that's all. We had a message from Rangoon, my dear. Your father died the night before last. I'm so sorry! I know you were close to him and that you'll miss him very much."

For an awful moment Portia thought she was going to faint. "Yes, I'll miss him," she said. "I must go back to

England for the funeral. I should never have left him!"

Simon grasped her by the elbows. "He didn't want you there! He wanted you safely out of the way when it happened."

"With you?"

"He thought it was what you wanted," Simon said grimly.

"Did what I want ever matter to either of you?" she demanded.

Simon went white under his tan. "You'd better go with Esther. She won't mind if you cry on her shoulder."

"Yes, do come with me," Esther said. It's just occurred to me who you are!"

Portia drew a chilly, English reserve about her but she allowed herself to be led away to the waiting jeep by the American woman.

"Who am I?" Portia asked.

"You're the girl who let Simon get away!"

"I was a disappointing interlude!" Portia said. "I bored him stiff."

"Goodness, how silly young girls can be! If you'd bored him, would he be after you all these years later, looking as if he can't allow you out of his sight? What I'd give to be in your shoes! I wouldn't still be quarrelling with him after two days alone in some Burmese jungle!"

Portia hesitated. Esther was able to make everything sound so simple, but it wasn't simple at all! She remembered again what her father had said to her, that no man in his senses would tie himself up to an hysterical adolescent schoolgirl in the throes of puppy love.

"My father—"

"Your father wanted you with him, didn't he?" Esther asked. "Did he ever pass on Simon's message to you?"

Portia shook her head. As far as she knew there had been no message. Simon had gone without a word—or so her father had always told her, but then her

father had never bothered to disguise his need for her, or that he considered it her bounden duty to stay with him. It was hard to forgive him, when it would have meant so much to her that Simon hadn't left her without saying goodbye. It was that which had slowly frozen her feelings inside her and had made her more of a robot than a living, breathing person.

"I'd be better off seeing about my father's affairs in England," she mumbled. "It's what he would have wanted."

Esther smiled. "Your father can have no claim on you now, Portia. I think it's Simon's turn to be shown some consideration. Couldn't you find it in your heart to be as generous to him as you were to your father?"

"If I thought he really wants me. He's never given any sign of it!"

"My dear girl, what do you expect? He was bitterly hurt that someone he'd fallen deeply in love with should have put her father before him. Look, we don't have to go straight to the hotel. Why don't I drive round Mandalay until you've got your bearings. It'll give you time to think what you're going to do about the man in your life."

"I left a message for you with your father that I wanted to marry you. What was I to think when you never answered?"

She turned into the main street of the small, dusty town. Behind pink, crenellated walls the old royal city of King Thibaw had stood. Now nothing was left of it but a small museum containing the few relics of the last of the kings of Burma.

Portia turned to Esther. "You're being

very nice to me," she began awkwardly.
"It can't be easy for you."

Esther laughed. "I would have liked at one time to have something with Simon, but I knew it was never to be."

Portia did not know what she would say to Simon when they returned. And she felt as if she were listening to someone else when she said, "Simon, I'm going back to England."

Simon put his hands on her shoulders, his eyes dark and angry. "If you go, I won't lift a finger to get you back!"

She took a deep breath. "So, what's new?" she asked.

His fingers tightened painfully. "What more could I have done? I left a message with your father that I wanted to marry you if you'd have me—as soon as you could get a visa for the States. What was I to think when you never gave me an answer?"

"What anyone would think! That my father never passed on the message! He never did anything that would inconvenience him. You knew that!"

He almost threw her away from him. She was shocked to see he had tears in his eyes and she wanted to rush to him, to comfort him, as she had so often longed to be comforted by him.

"Go back to England and see if I care!" he roared at her. "It was what your father planned for you, wasn't it? You'll never be free of him. You'll be Dr. Cochrane's daughter until the day you die!"

"And what will I be if I stay? Dr. Farrow's mistress?"

His arms went round her and he kissed her hard on the mouth, not caring whether he hurt her or not.

"Why not?" he said. "If that's what you want to be?"

Portia went out to the shrine at Kuthodaw by herself. She wanted at least

to see the site where she was to have worked.

Kuthodaw was beautiful in the evening light. The central pagoda was filled with sunshine and space. There were no stalls to clutter up the entrance, nothing but bare walls and the distant statue of the seated Buddha, his hand raised in benediction. The seven-hundred-and-thirty small pagodas, each one housing one page of the heaviest book in the world, the sacred Buddhist text of the shrine, stretched for as far as one could see in every direction, each one white and perfectly shaped to match its fellows.

Portia browsed slowly down one of the long lines of pagodas and came face to face with Simon in the middle.

"Still here?" he jeered at her.

She ignored his ill humour. "Simon, may I have my sapphire back?"

He stared at her with a contempt that hurt. "Just like that? You haven't done anything to earn it yet. Do you expect it for free?"

She kept her cool, suddenly surer of herself than he had ever known her. "Why not?" she said with a shrug.

He turned on his heel and walked away from her. Portia, with a new feeling of freedom, went on her own way. There was a goldsmith's shack near the pagoda, where nuggets of Burmese gold were transformed into paper-thin squares for temple worshippers to buy and apply to the representations of Buddha.

"I need to buy gold for two rings," she told the goldsmith.

"We make gold for Buddha."

"Yes, I know, but you're the only people who have gold, and it is very important."

"First we must finish what we are doing here," the man said.

Portia had no choice but to agree. She waited patiently.

After a while she lost all sense of time. They would be missing her at the hotel, she thought, but still she didn't give up her vigil.

Finally, they were done.

"Now we will talk," the man said. "It is important to you to have this gold?"

"When we marry in the West we put a ring on our finger," she explained, as solemn as he.

He grinned with understanding. "I have seen such rings!" he exclaimed. "But who will make these symbols of your union with you man?"

"I don't know," Portia admitted. "Dr. Farrow has the sapphire for one of the rings and I wanted to supply the gold."

"You both bring much to the marriage," the man said, impressed. "Tell your man to bring the gold and the sapphire back to me and I will make your rings."

The gold cost practically every *kyat*, the denomination in which Burmese money is reckoned, that she had in the world. She would have to stay on in Burma now.

It was later when Portia knocked on Simon's door. The door opened to reveal Simon clad only in a towelling robe that barely reached his knees. "What do you want?" he asked sleepily.

Portia put both arms around his neck and drew his mouth down to hers.

He hugged her close against him in the most satisfactory manner.

"I have something for you," she said. She took out the small package of gold and put it in his hand, snuggling back against him. "You can consider it a down payment on this," she added quietly, running her hands under his robe and down the rippling muscles of his back.

"What am I supposed to say? That I don't take presents from strange ladies? What is it?" he asked.

"Open it and see."

She was pleased to see that his hands weren't quite steady as he opened the tiny package. He picked out the nuggets of gold and cradled them in the palm of his hand.

"I'm not going to say I'm not for sale," he said at last. "I've been yours these last five years. You had only to open the bidding, but you never did. You owed me something for that, Portia Cochrane."

She stepped away from him, sitting on her hands on the edge of his bed.

"I owed you nothing," she insisted. "It was you who owed some kindness to a young, green girl whom you walked away from without a word of explanation."

His eyes flashed and she knew she had caught him on the raw. "I wrote to you, care of your father, every month for five years. Sometimes your father would write back to say you still weren't interested enough to write yourself. I wanted to marry you!"

"So much you couldn't be bothered to find out at first hand what my answer was?"

His lips twisted into a grimace. "Your father said you didn't want me. He was convincing too. How was I to know that he hadn't passed my message on to you? I knew he was a selfish old man, but I didn't think he would be so completely unscrupulous—at least, not where you were concerned."

"Where *he* was concerned," Portia corrected him. "He liked to be puppet master and he was afraid his favourite toy was going to escape him."

"I was surprised when he wrote saying you were coming out here in his place. It was only when a mutual friend told me his health was breaking down that I saw why he might be prepared to release you at last. What I didn't know was why you agreed to come."

"I've learned it's easier to do as I'm told. If I'd known you were leading the expedition, I might have rebelled. I expect he thought I would have outgrown any feeling I ever had for you by now."

"And have you? You realise that if you stay on here with me you'll have defeated all his plans for you?"

"I will, won't I?" she agreed calmly. "If I stay on here with you."

As if anything would make her leave now! She thought of all the time they had wasted and found it hard not to feel bitter against her father for turning so much of her youth into a desert of study and disillusionment. It didn't help much to know he had thought he was doing the best thing for her.

Simon took her by the hands and pulled her up close against him. "I can't let you go now, Portia," he told her. "I need you too much, now and for always."

She trembled against him. "You have me," she said. She turned her head and smiled at him, her eyes dark with the depth of her feelings for him. "How about now?" she whispered.

His mouth closed over hers, taking her breath away and giving her a taste of what was to come. "Not until we've got those rings made and on your finger," he decided firmly. "It's what we'd both prefer,

having waited for each other all this time. Though, if you look at me like that again, we might not make it!"

"Do I have any say in all this?" she teased him.

He shook his head, kissing her again. "None at all," he said.

The next day found Portia hard at work on a set of Pali texts at the breakfast table.

"At work already?" Simon asked her, sitting down opposite her.

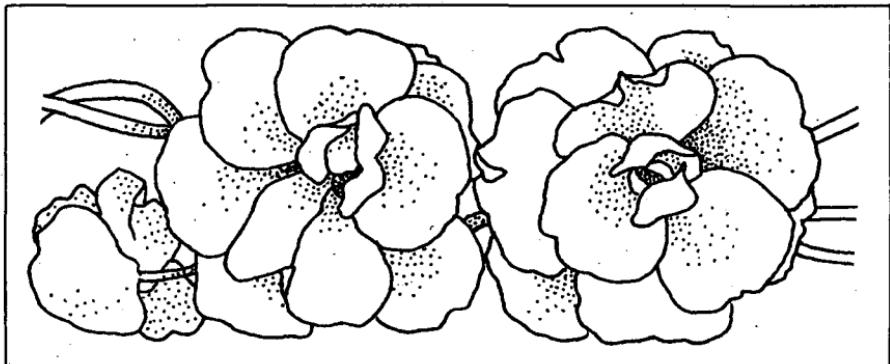
She gave up her pretence of reading. "My mind seems to be on other things," she complained. "I've never felt less like work!"

"It'll come back," he comforted her. "If you ask me, you've worked too hard for years. I shan't complain if you take a day or two off for your honeymoon."

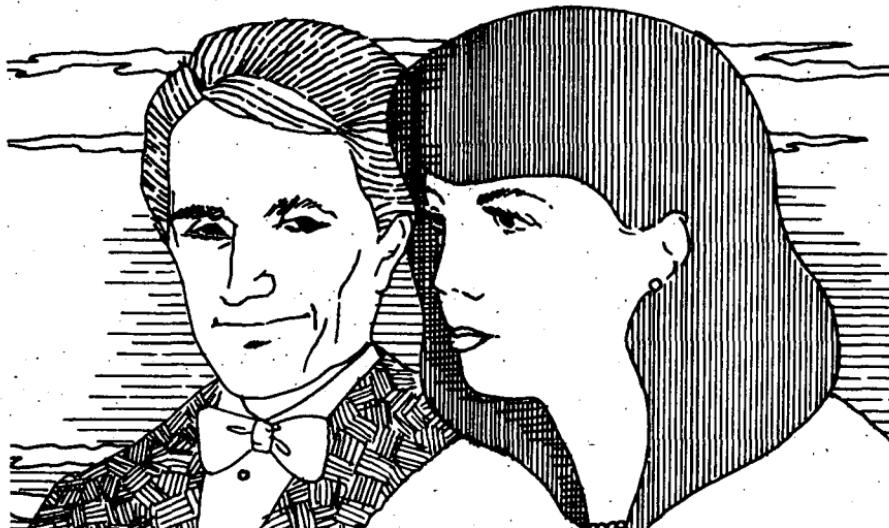
"Are you speaking as my employer?" she teased.

"More likely as the man who's in love with you and wants to keep you to himself for awhile."

She was overcome by the depth of the affection in his voice. "Oh, Simon, I love you too!" she whispered. "I'm glad it happened as it did after all. It wouldn't have been the same in Cambridge. I was a girl then. Now I am a woman," she added proudly before his smiling lips met hers. ♡



Return Engagement



When Liza begins rehearsing a new play, she is stunned to learn that the playwright is the one man on earth she has sworn to forget. Will she fall in love again, only to lose him for a second time?

By DIANA DIXON

Liza climbed the steps out of the Seventh Avenue subway and crossed Forty-seventh Street. How she loved the city! She loved the masses of people and blaring horns, the frenetic din of busy humanity. Every day in New York City was an adventure with infinite variety, a place where in the middle of the teeming masses, one could feel completely alone.

When Liza reached Forty-fifth Street she turned and walked the half-block to the theater, made her way down the alley at its side, and let herself in the side door. The small entryway was dark, but she

could see the lighted stage and hear the raised voices of the actors. Pushing apart the velvet drapes, she stood for a minute while her eyes adjusted to the darkness, but before she could move to take a seat, the dark figure of a man joined her where she stood.

"Well, well, well," a vaguely familiar voice drawled in her ear, "if it isn't Liza Marsh, a particularly bright star in the Broadway constellation."

"If you're selling something, I don't want any," she answered pertly, and moved to go around the man.

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"Ah, my dear Liza, after all these years to be mistaken for a salesman! That hurts!"

"Garrick! Garrick Worth!" she gasped.

An impatient whisper from the front of the theater cut off his reply, but his firm hand under her elbow led her down the aisle and thrust her into an empty seat not far from the stage. As he sat down beside her, enough light spilled over for her to see Garrick's face clearly for the first time, and her eyes were drawn to the firm jaw and thick, dark hair that swept back from his low forehead. In profile his features were just as she remembered them, but as he turned, aware of her intense scrutiny, she saw the changes that eight years had made in his face. Somehow he looked different from the man she had known when she was seventeen, the man who had held her in his arms, who had given her her first kisses, who had . . .

As memory darkened her thoughts, she found it impossible to sustain his deep, penetrating stare, and quickly she lowered her eyes to her hands, clasped tightly in her lap.

What was he doing here? she wondered. Why after all these years had he turned up at the final rehearsal of a revival of *Romeo and Juliet*?

The dimming of the lights onstage called her attention to the action of the play. How appropriate that it was the balcony scene! she thought ruefully. Hadn't Garrick played Romeo to her Juliet?

Garrick's thoughts had obviously followed her own as he murmured in her ear, "Very fitting that we should watch this together, don't you think?"

Liza thought of nothing but the desire to be out of this uncomfortable situation! She made her way out into the lobby and past the line formed in front of the ticket

window. A number of people recognized her and smiled, and one young girl in her early teens came shyly forward, holding out a battered school notebook which Liza signed happily.

The little interlude had done a lot to relieve Liza's jitters. It was nonsense to let Garrick Worth's presence unnerve her! The world was small when one worked in such a public profession, and she and Garrick had been bound to meet again sooner or later. But the theater world was not Garrick's usual sphere. What on earth was he doing here at this closed rehearsal? She hadn't even known he was back in the country. The last she had read in the papers, he was living in Africa with some jungle tribe.

Usually, she thought wryly, his frequent sojourns in New York created no small stir. The gossip columns were filled with tidbits about his love life and other activities. He was known to frequent the New York nightclubs with the cream of society, and always with a lovely lady on his arm. Oh, yes, Garrick was considered a highly romantic figure and a most eligible bachelor.

While the society pages were interested only in his amorous adventures, the more scholarly sections of the papers discussed his current best sellers. For years now he had braved the wilds of the most dangerous and exotic places in the world, and even Liza had to admit that he had a gift for bringing people and places to life for the reader. Only a couple of months ago she had caught the tail end of a television documentary on the Guatemalan Highlands based on one of his books. Garrick himself had acted as tour guide.

She remembered being pleased at the time that she could watch the program with a cool detachment. Only very rarely now did she suffer a twinge when she thought about Garrick and the might-

have-beens. Unfortunately, she admitted ruefully, meeting Garrick face to face for the first time in years had come as a severe shock!

He had changed almost beyond recognition. The Garrick of her memory had never spoken to her in that voice of icy sarcasm, and his eyes had never burned into her with such hot anger. But then, who could blame him? she sighed.

The fault was hers for the disastrous end to their romance. If only she had had more experience with men. If only she had not allowed her mother to poison her mind. If only she had trusted Garrick more. If only! If only! She pulled a face at herself in the lobby mirror. She couldn't live her life on the "if only's." She could only excuse herself on the grounds that she was young and inexperienced and insecure then—much more naive than most girls her age—and continue to live with the regret that she had been a coward and a cheat.

Yes, she admitted sadly, the pain was still there—not the pain of lost love that had been dulled by time, but the sharp pain of regret.

In the distance she heard the clock strike the half-hour. She had better get back into the theater. Quietly she opened the door and slipped back into the darkened auditorium.

Why had she allowed Garrick's appearance to upset her so much? The past was dead. It had to be!

Not until after the house lights had been brought back up at the end of the act did she look around for Garrick, but as

her eyes found the seat where he had been sitting, she saw that it was now empty. Sometime before the curtain had come down, he had slipped out, and Liza didn't know whether she was happy or not to avoid another meeting with him. To run into him so unexpectedly had been very unnerving, but it was almost as disturbing to have him disappear so suddenly—as though he were an apparition of her own confused mind!

With a quick shake of her head she tried to shrug off the feeling of unease the encounter had given her. A wave of her hand brought a taxi to a stop, and gratefully she climbed in and gave the driver the address of her Riverside Drive apartment. With a sigh she relaxed back into the seat as the cab fought its way through the traffic. Why had she allowed Garrick's appearance to upset her so much?

The past was dead for her. It had to be! She knew Liza Marsh the actress was an entirely different person from the gauche, gangly schoolgirl who fell head over heels in love with Garrick Worth the first moment she had set eyes on him. Liza sighed. If only she hadn't been so young and frightened!

Sunday evening Liza took a taxi to Teddy Barnett's apartment. Teddy was a successful producer and director—and Liza's old friend. He was forming an ensemble company to help develop a new script, *Daphne*. Part of the script was already written, and the balance would take shape as they worked. They would use a lot of music, movement and dance. Liza had never been involved in a project quite like it; and was very excited about the idea. She had just completed a year's run starring in a light musical farce, and was looking forward to a meatier role.

As the doors of the elevator slid noiselessly back, she saw Teddy waiting

for her in the open doorway of his apartment.

"Hi, Teddy. Am I late?"

"Right on time, love, but everyone else is here. Come in and meet the group."

Putting an arm around her shoulders, he led her into the sunken conversation pit in the center of the living room. A dozen or so men and women were seated around on the encircling sofas, but it was the sight of one of them that made her heart sink. Leaning back in a corner seat was Garrick Worth, engaged in conversation with a stylish blonde.

"Let's see," Teddy said to the group at large, "you all know Liza Marsh. Liza, I think you know everyone but Erica Black and Garrick Worth."

"I know Mr. Worth," she replied with admirable poise and turned to smile at the blonde whose name she now recognized as the star of a current television series. "How do you do, Miss Black?"

The younger woman gave Liza a speculative look as she acknowledged the greeting and then laid a possessive hand on Garrick's knee. "Rick, darling," she cooed, "you didn't tell me that you knew Liza Marsh."

"Oh, Liza and I go back to the good old days, don't we Liza?"

Teddy's expression was puzzled as he glanced from one to the other. "You didn't mention you knew Liza when we discussed the possibility of her being in the group."

"I didn't think you would be interested in my whole personal history, Teddy," Garrick said with a casual shrug of his shoulders.

Liza grew increasingly uneasy as she met Garrick's speculative stare. For the life of her she couldn't figure out what his connection was with Teddy's project. It didn't seem likely that he could be one of the backers of the show.

"Could we get on with this, Teddy?" she asked, a bit impatiently for her.

"Of course, Liza. Of course," he replied quickly, sensing her disquiet. "Sit down, please, and we'll get started...."

"Of course. The whole play," Garrick began, "is based on the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo. Daphne was a young huntress, daughter of the river-god, who wanted nothing to do with men. The play would be a modern version of the Greek myth in which Daphne escapes Apollo's lustful embrace by turning into a laurel tree. Woven in and out of the modern story are Daphne and Apollo dream sequences in which the myth is acted out. The action moves back and forth from reality to fantasy."

When Garrick had finished explaining his concept, Teddy asked, "Any comments or questions?"

Erica reclined back in her seat and gave him a long, slow smile. "You haven't told us about the specific casting. Who plays Daphne?"

"Liza will play Daphne, and I think we've found our Apollo. I asked some of you to sit in on the rehearsal of *Romeo and Juliet* the other day. I've had my eye on Rod Willis, who is playing Mercutio. He gave an excellent audition, but he hasn't had as much professional experience as the rest of you. What did you think of him, Garrick?"

"He looked fine to me."

"Liza?"

"I had never seen his work before, but I liked him."

"All right, then." Teddy smiled. "It's all settled. Unless you hear differently, we'll begin rehearsals at the end of September."

Teddy talked on for another several minutes, answering questions that arose, but Liza found it increasingly hard to concentrate. More than once she met Gar-

rick's cold, assessing gaze, and it set her nerves on edge.

The meeting finally broke up, but as people began moving toward the door, Liza remained seated, her eyes on Garrick and Erica, still engaged in a low-voiced conversation.

Liza stopped her musings as Garrick and Erica rose to leave. Impulsively, she reached a decision. She wanted to work on this play very badly. She knew it had good potential, and in spite of personal qualms, she was really impressed with Garrick's concept. The whole experience could be exciting—a real growing experience for her. But is she was to have any peace of mind, she first had to make some attempt to clear the air with Garrick. How could she possibly work if he was constantly glowering at her!

Liza gasped at the bitterness in Garrick's tone. If it had survived for eight years, how he must hate her!

Casually, she picked up her handbag and crossed to where Garrick and Erica stood. This wasn't exactly going to endear her to Erica, she thought wryly.

"Sorry to interrupt, Garrick," she said with her most winning smile, "but I wonder if I could beg a lift home. It's been so long since I've seen you that I thought we might catch up on all the news."

His eyes narrowed at this gambit, but after a moment's hesitation he answered coolly, "Of course. I brought Erica with me, but if you don't mind coming with us while I drop her off at her apartment, you can invite me in for a cup of coffee at your place."

The younger actress let out an indignant gasp as fury darkened her pretty face. "Don't trouble yourself! I can always take a taxi!"

"Nonsense, my dear," he drawled. "I'm sure that Liza would be delighted for a chance to get to know you better. After all, we're all going to be working very closely together, aren't we?"

Garrick's face was stern and forbidding as he took his place beside Liza and started the car. After dropping off Erica, Liza spoke first. "Tell me, Garrick, why did you do it? Feeling as you obviously do about me, why did you let Teddy cast me in your play?"

"I must admit that I was slightly stunned when he suggested you. But Teddy considered you quite a prize. He assures me that you have all the right qualities to play Daphne—a freshness and innocence that make you look as guileless as a child. I didn't care to tell him that I knew that look well! He obviously hasn't discovered that you also have a heart of stone. You must disguise that fact very effectively."

Liza gasped at the bitterness in Garrick's tone. If that bitterness had survived eight years, how he must hate her!

"Also," he continued, "this is a situation fraught with irony! What you obviously haven't seen in the play yet is that I latched onto the Daphne-Apollo myth after I had written the core of the script. The original idea actually came from my experience with you! It seems to me entirely fitting that you should play the character that you yourself helped me to create!"

Liza led the way into her livingroom. "Shall we get down to business and discuss the matter at hand?" Her words were clipped and her movements confident as she settled herself into the corner of the sofa.

Garrick hesitated a moment and then relaxed into an easy chair at her side.

"Which is?"

"Don't be obtuse!" she snapped. "What concerns me is your play and my place in the company, as you very well know! The pertinent question is whether or not it is going to be possible for us to work together like two civilized adults. If you feel that it's beyond you to treat me with common courtesy, you'd better have a talk with Teddy and let me bow out gracefully now before we tear each other to shreds, because let me make it perfectly clear that I have no intention of remaining silent while you make mincemeat of me with your sarcasm!"

"I would say that you seem more than able to take care of yourself," he murmured caustically.

"Look, Garrick," Liza continued more calmly, "let's be reasonable about this. I admit that you have very good reason for despising me. You can't blame me for what happened any more than I blamed myself these eight years. But how long do I have to pay for being young and stupid!"

His eyes moved from the slim figure on the couch to the luxurious decor of the spacious room around her. The soft greens and eggshell white were an excellent foil for her vivid beauty.

"I can't see that you've paid any price at all, Liza. Life has treated you very well. I am sure you convinced yourself long ago that you were well out of a bad bargain when you walked—or should I say sneaked—out on me. After all, I was nothing but a struggling young writer at the time. The possibility that I could ever have kept you in anything approaching this luxurious style was pretty remote."

"All right! That's enough!" she interrupted angrily. "Is that what you really think? Can you actually believe... Never mind! I don't have to defend myself to you. Not now. The past is dead!"

Emotionally exhausted, sick at heart, Liza wished desperately that she had never forced this confrontation with Garrick. But how could she have known that he still had the power to bring back her guilt and pain to such an intense degree, or that he still harbored such antagonism toward her, for that matter? If she had had an ounce of sense, she would have walked out of Teddy's apartment the minute she knew Garrick was involved. Now it was too late to back out without revealing just how much he had disturbed her—and she had some pride herself, after all.

"The decision is yours, Garrick," she said into the silence. "You don't have to answer now. Think about it for the next couple of days, and then let me know either yourself or through Teddy what you have decided. If you decide that you want me out, I won't blame you a bit, but I refuse to be subjected to your constant gibes and recriminations. I—I couldn't possibly work in such an atmosphere. So if you decide to work with me, it has got to be agreed that we put the past behind us."

Garrick stared deeply into her eyes, and she forced herself not to flinch from his gaze. It seemed as though he were trying to turn her soul inside out.

The silence lengthened as he continued to stare.

"Please, Garrick," she said when she finally couldn't take the strain of the silence any longer, "I'd like you to go now. I think we've said everything that needs to be said."

Her plea roused him from his abstraction, and he gave her a strange half-smile as he pulled himself upright in the chair.

"You've given me a lot to think about, Liza," he said with a wry twist of his lips. "Who would have ever thought that the playful cub I once knew would have turned into such a tiger?" Once more his eyes

raked over her face and figure. "You've changed a great deal, Liza, and you've developed a very agile tongue!"

He rose to his feet, ran a hand over his tousled hair, and straightened his tie before he asked, "Will you have lunch with me on Thursday? I'll give you my answer then."

The unexpectedness of his request threw her off balance, and she hesitated a moment before answering cautiously, "All right, I guess so. Where?"

"I'll pick you up here about one, and we'll go some place quiet where we can talk." He put a hand on her shoulder as she would have risen. "Don't bother to see me out."

Too tired and confused to move, Liza stared at the door for long moments after it closed behind him.

Liza remained on edge for the next two days. She heard nothing more from either Teddy or Garrick. On Thursday she got ready with great deliberation for the luncheon date.

When the doorbell rang, she went to greet Garrick. Though outwardly calm, the sight of him in a light blue lounge suit took her breath away. For a long moment neither of them spoke; then Garrick moved, and the spell was broken.

"I had begun to believe that a prompt woman was an extinct species," he said with a smile, and Liza was shaken by the warmth in his voice and the way his eyes wandered approvingly over her green-clad body. Unaccountably shy, she reached for her handbag and preceded him out the door.

It wasn't until he had helped her into the car and started across town that he spoke. "I want you to do the play, Liza," he said slowly. "As I told you, you were my inspiration."

"I'm not quite sure yet just how I

should take that," she said dryly. "Should I be pleased, or offended?"

"I'll leave that for you to discover," he replied with a smile that left her more confused than ever. "Well, will you do it if I promise to be on my best behavior?"

"Yes," she breathed quickly before her better judgment could take over.

"Good! Then that's settled."

*Dinner alone with Garrick?
She would as willingly pull out
all her eyelashes!*

"Rehearsal is set for ten tomorrow, Bertha," Liza called to her housekeeper as she stretched and then settled down in the corner of the couch, the script for *Daphne* on her lap. She had enjoyed the week of leisure following her retirement from the cast of *Sing for Your Supper*, but it would be good to get back to work.

The next morning Liza arrived a few minutes early and found Teddy and Garrick working through the script together. Both men greeted her arrival with a quick wave of the hand and then bent back over their papers. This gave Liza a chance to look at Garrick unobserved.

It was the first time she had seen him dressed in anything but a suit, and he looked tall and fit in jeans and a navy turtleneck jersey. His face seemed even darker, and Liza guessed that wherever he had gone this past week, the climate had been hot.

She didn't realize how long she had been staring at him until he turned his head and smiled a slow, sardonic smile. She had forgotten just what his smile could do to her nervous system, but after a week working on the *Daphne* role, she

refused to be beguiled by the charm that disguised a decidedly vengeful nature!

All morning long they worked the three scenes that made up the first act, and when Teddy called a break two hours later, Liza knew that her acting had never been better. Once she began working, she had been able to block out Garrick's presence completely and become so totally immersed in the role that it had even come as something of a shock when they halted for lunch.

"Marvelous, marvelous, Liza!" Teddy enthused on her way out. "Didn't you think so, Garrick?"

"You're everything I envisioned the character to be," Garrick drawled. "I'm amazed at how quickly you've caught the spirit of the role."

Liza's eyes narrowed and she had to clamp her lips tightly shut to keep from throwing his words back in his mocking face. She refused to lose her temper and said with a sweet, false smile, "Chalk it up to my training. I had a very good teacher."

A swift smile that just caught one corner of his mouth acknowledged the hit. Score one for me! Liza thought with satisfaction, but as she turned toward the door, Garrick stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Teddy and I have to talk through the lunch break, and then I'm leaving for a meeting. Will you have dinner with me tonight?"

After the last little exchange, Liza was staggered by his suggestion. Dinner alone with Garrick? She would as willingly pull out all her eyelashes! But before she gave in to her first instinctive response, reason took over. Well, why not? Perhaps if they saw more of each other, it might help them establish a more satisfactory relationship than armed neutrality. Just because they had once meant much more

to each other didn't mean they couldn't be friends now.

He reached down and drew a lazy finger along the side of her cheek. "Eight o'clock?" he asked softly.

His touch burned like fire, and for a moment her courage failed her. Then, against her good judgment, Liza found herself nodding in agreement.

"Good. And if I don't get back before rehearsal ends, I'll see you tonight. Let's dress up and make a night of it."

As Liza put the final touches on her light makeup the doorbell rang, and she quickly reached for the silver-gray mink stole that Bertha had laid over the edge of the bed. Garrick was still standing when Liza entered the living room. She had never seen him in formal dress before, and the effect of the black tuxedo and white frilled shirt was devastating. She could tell that he had made an attempt to conquer the waves in his black hair, but one unruly lock swung down across his forehead, giving him a slightly raffish air. No man had the right to be so handsome, she thought almost crossly as he took her hand in his and gently rubbed his thumb over the palm.

"I haven't seen you wear your hair down for a long time, Liza," he murmured. "It looks like a halo around your head."

It was easy to see how Garrick had earned his reputation with women, she thought dryly. Her voice was a masterpiece of cool amusement as she casually removed her hand from his hold.

No woman could have remained totally impervious to such blatant charm, Liza thought, and as dinner progressed in the chic supper club Garrick had brought her to, she lost all desire to even try. At the beginning of their truce, he had promised her his best behavior, but not in her wildest imaginings had she expected this.

His practiced manner brought out everything feminine in her. The novelty of wanting to be admired by a man was a heady experience for her and made her throw caution to the winds. She knew it must be a game he played with his numerous women friends, but wasn't there safety in being just one among many? Why not enjoy herself! Surely it could do no harm to let down her guard in the same way she had let down her hair—at least for one night.

Just as coffee was being served, the orchestra returned from its break and began playing once more. Without a word Garrick stood and held out his hand to Liza and drew her gently to her feet. Their steps matched perfectly as they took to the dance floor. It was as though no time at all had elapsed since they had last shared a dance. They dipped and swayed to the music, and as he pulled her tighter into his embrace, she felt his lips against her temple moving down the side of her cheek. His hand pulled her hair away from her ear, and his soft breath stirred the wisps of hair remaining as his mouth sought the gentle hollow just below. Liza could hardly breathe. He seemed to be draining the very strength out of her, and when his teeth closed over the lobe of her ear, an audible gasp was expelled from her parted lips.

"Garrick! Please don't!" she whispered huskily. "People are staring at us."

"Do you really care?" His voice was a warm caress as he pulled her closer still.

Never had Liza danced so close to a man. Suddenly she felt stifled by his nearness and the press of people around them. Pulling away from him the little he would allow, she took her hand from his shoulder and raised it to her flushed cheek.

"Could we go somewhere and get some

fresh air?" she asked shakily.

"That's an invitation I won't refuse!" He smiled a wicked smile that made her catch her breath.

Her eyes mirrored her chaotic thoughts. What was he doing to her? What did he want from her?

He stopped before an open door leading to the terrace that ran the length of the restaurant. Liza only half-noticed his arm around her waist as he led her from the room. Her brow was wrinkled in concentration.

One of Garrick's hands were creating havoc with her nervous system by running up and down along her spine, and flustered, Liza moved away from him to stand beside the low wall of the terrace.

Instantly, she knew that she had made a mistake in letting Garrick bring her out here. They were the only ones who had ventured out into the warm night air.

Turning abruptly back toward the doorway, she found that Garrick had been standing directly behind her, much nearer than she had realized. She tilted her head to read his intentions in his expression, but instead their gaze locked, and his eyes, black in the moonlight, mesmerized her into stillness.

"Were you a witch in a previous life?" he whispered huskily. "What magic do you use that draws men to you even as you reject them, that challenges a man to try and break down the barriers you set up to shut him out? You've never made love, have you, Liza." It was a statement, not a question. "I knew you were unawakened that first night in your apartment. I could see it in your eyes."

Slowly he began to lower his head, never taking his eyes off hers. She could feel his breath, soft and warm, coming from between his parted lips. In desperation she closed her lids, too weak to move, expecting any moment to have her lips captured by the burning hardness of his own.

With his mouth only a fraction of an inch away from hers, he stopped. "Do you want me to kiss you, Liza?" he whispered. "Do you want me to take you in my arms?" Her eyes opened and she looked into his face, so close above her. "Because if you do," he persisted, "you're going to have to ask me. You're going to have to tell me what you want."

Her eyes mirrored her bewildered, chaotic thoughts. What was he doing to her? What did he want from her? With a choked cry she pulled herself away from his light touch and turned to support her weight on the stone wall, her legs like jelly.

Garrick had not moved from where she left him, and Liza quickly gathered her scattered wits. When she finally turned back to him, a cool, insincere smile curved her lips.

"Shall we go back in now, Garrick? Our coffee will be cold."

"That's it, Liza," he applauded, "drop into character. But at least tell me which one it is. Am I being treated to the ingenue in a situation comedy, or have you cast yourself as heroine in a melodrama?"

His mockery tightened the muscles in her stomach. "Let's just say," she drawled with admirable calm, "that I wasn't in the mood to play a love scene, shall we?"

"Oh, Liza, you little liar! You can fool yourself if you choose, but don't try and fool me. You were in the mood, all right, but I wasn't willing to play the part of the villain for you. I do wonder, though, how you would have written the next scene—

after the kiss. What would it have been? The injured innocent? The blushing virgin? The blasé woman of the world? Or would you have seen yourself as the tragic queen whose subject offended beyond forgiveness? You see, I wasn't willing to take the chance."

This last broke the final hold on her temper. "You're despicable!" she spat at him with choking rage.

"Now, that's a good old-fashioned word! Grow up, Liza. Get with the times. These are the days of the emancipated woman who admits that she has needs and desires and passions that need fulfillment. But don't despair. I haven't given up hope yet. There's still plenty of time for you to learn."

"But not from you, Mr. Worth! Forgive me if I write you out of my script!"

The emotional strain of the evening had started to tell on her, and she felt a pounding in back of her eyes that made her vulnerable and unequal to any more verbal sparring. "Take me home, Garrick, will you, please? I—I have a headache."

"In any other woman, I would think that was just an evasion tactic," he said dryly, "but I have a feeling that you really do."

Once back at their table, Garrick signaled for the check. "I'm going to be tied up for a few days, but will you have dinner with me Saturday night?" He smiled, and the smile held none of the earlier mockery.

"You must be out of your mind!" she gasped incredulously. "You can't possibly imagine that I would lay myself open for another hatchet job by you! And I can't imagine that you could have much pleasure in taking me out, either!"

"Of course I could." His smile broadened. "I may find you many things, Liza, but boring is certainly not one of

them. I've enjoyed this evening immensely. Surely you wouldn't deprive me of your stimulating company!"

Gladly, Liza thought bitterly, but at the same time her pulse raced at the thought of doing battle with him again. He challenged her as no other man she had ever known. But next time she'd know what she was getting into and be better prepared!

"All right," she agreed. "But watch out!"

He laughed openly at the militant sparkle in her eyes. "I intend to! Now I'd better get you home. Working women need to turn in early."

Liza's emotions were in a turmoil as she looked forward to Saturday night. But as it happened, the weekend date didn't materialize. Late Tuesday night Liza received a call from Teddy Barnett.

"Liza, my love, how would you like to spend a couple of weeks in Vermont?"

"This is so sudden," she replied demurely. "But what would your wife say?"

Teddy chuckled appreciatively. "You're not coming away with me, stupid—with the whole company! Garrick and I decided that while we work the Daphne and Apollo parts that have to be improvised, it would be interesting to work outdoors; Garrick's got some friends with a summer place northeast of Burlington, in the Green Mountains. Any questions?"

"Will...er...is Garrick going along with us?"

"Sure. This is when he will do most of his work on the rest of the script." There was a pause while Teddy waited for her response. "Does Garrick trouble you, love?"

"Oh, no, no! I was just wondering."

Truth to be told, Garrick's going did trouble her a great deal. She sat staring at the telephone for several minutes after

Teddy had hung up. Several times she and Garrick had driven up into Vermont just to get away from her mother's watchful eyes. She didn't relish the thought of having those memories brought back by being there with him again. She was a city girl now, and her city life gave her more confidence. Here she was a different person from the young girl who had tramped through the woods at Garrick's side.

Niggling doubts kept eating at her during the next day as she packed. Garrick at close range was very worrisome, and it was wearing on her nerves just having him popping in and out at rehearsals. The thought of being in the same house with him, seeing him constantly, was daunting!

Teddy had arranged for them to stay at a resort hotel located on Lake Champlain for the first night of their retreat. "One last night of civilization before we go into hibernation," he had joked. Indian summer had brought a great many tourists to the area and the hotel was crowded, but their rooms were charmingly rustic.

After an hour to freshen up, the group met again in the dining room for dinner, which turned out to be a gay occasion. During dessert as she listened to an exchange between Teddy and Sam Payne, an older comic type with whom she had worked in several plays, she caught a venomous look from Erica and realized that Garrick had risen from his place and was now directly behind her.

"Care to dance?" he asked casually from somewhere behind her left ear.

She turned and met the challenging gleam in his dark eyes. Their gaze held. Her heart began to pound and her breath shortened, and before she could make a fool of herself, she quickly nodded and rose to her feet as he pulled back her chair.

A tingle of pleasure went down her spine as his arm moved around her and his

warm hand met the bare skin exposed by the low back of her halter top. He drew her close, and in low-heeled shoes, the top of her head barely reached his chin.

Moving in perfect unison, they circled the dance floor in silence, giving themselves up to the seductive beat of the music. The floor was much less crowded than the last time they had danced, and now with more room to move, Garrick exhibited his not inconsiderable dancing talent. His movements were intricate, but Liza was no novice herself and followed him with ease.

They danced in silence, and then as he began to quickly turn, he pulled her even tighter into his embrace, his hand moving sensuously down her spine to her lower back, forcing her hips tightly against his own. Pivoting, he insinuated one leg between her own, and at the touch of the full length of his body, she gasped and tried to pull back. His hold only tightened, and unless she created a scene, there was nothing she could do but allow him to continue what was little short of public lovemaking.

"I thought there was a truce between us," he said softly in her ear as he felt her tension. His warm breath sent a chill down her spine and she tightened up even more.

"A truce, yes," she quavered, "but not total surrender!"

By the time the music ended and he released her, her legs were so weak that she could hardly stand.

As she realized that her choice of words had been unfortunate and heard the

answering chuckle that rang in her ear, she blushed a fiery red.

Garrick's voice was heavy with innuendo as he murmured, "Oh, no. Not surrender right here. That comes later!"

His confidence reduced her to silence once again, and his strength gave her no choice but to submit to his caressing hand while the dance continued.

By the time the music ended and he released her, her legs were so weak that she could hardly stand, and she clung to his arm to steady herself. Determinedly, she refused to meet his gaze, well aware that he was far too knowledgeable about women in general and her in particular not to know the effect he had on her. Right now she couldn't cope with the mocking triumph she was sure she would see in his eyes.

The music started again, but before he could pull her to him once more, she shook her head firmly and began making her way back to the table, not waiting to see if he followed.

At the first opportunity, she smiled brightly at the assembled company, made her excused, and went off to bed.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam, barn-ba-bam! Tony beat out a syncopated rhythm to the tambourine as Teddy watched the company of actors move fast and then slow to the changing beat.

For the first three days of their stay at the huge old rambling lodge, rain had kept them working indoors in the large recreation room. But today with the sun shining clear and bright, they had moved out onto the grassy meadow that sloped up to the woods and mountains behind the lodge.

"Take five!" Tony called and turned to consult with Garrick and Teddy. Gratefully, Liza lay her aching body out flat on the soft grass, arms and legs

outflung. She turned her head to the side with a smile as Sally, an older actress in the company, gingerly settled herself down.

"Ah!" Sally sighed and flexed a tired arm. "Who would have suspected that beneath Teddy's sweet, mild-mannered appearance is hidden a streak of sadism!"

She shot Liza a sideways grin, a mischievous twinkle in her eye. "And speaking of cruelty, when are you going to put Garrick out of his misery?"

Liza examined the nails on one hand with studied nonchalance. "Whatever are you talking about, Sally?"

"Don't give me that, dearie. You run for cover every time the man looks at you.

I don't mind your attaching yourself to me like a leech whenever Garrick comes near you, but it brings out my maternal instincts when I see him left to be the prey of that...that feline, Erica Black. You could cut her out without lifting a finger!"

"What makes you think I want to cut her out?"

"Running scared, Liza?" Sally asked, her eyes alight with laughter. "Garrick made it pretty obvious the first night at the hotel where his interest lies. And you aren't as indifferent as you would like me to believe," she added shrewdly. "You can't go on avoiding the man forever in these close quarters."

Day after day they worked on the dream sequences, and gradually their form began to take shape. Liza knew that Garrick's eyes followed her almost constantly. She sensed that he was torn between objective assessment and some smoldering, primitive emotion, almost like the character of Apollo that he had created.

Near the end of their two-week stay, Teddy was so pleased with the progress

they had made that he gave them a free day to go into Burlington.

Pleading a headache, Liza begged off from the excursion. For one awful moment she was afraid that Garrick was going to offer to stay home with her, but after a searching look at her pale face, he kept whatever he was going to say to himself.

As soon as the vans were out of sight, she made her way through the lodge to the kitchen to pick up her lunch from the housekeeper and also tell the woman where she was headed.

Liza felt a marvelous sense of freedom as she made her way across the grassy slopes to the woods behind the lodge. It felt so good to be alone after two weeks of having constant company.

After eating her lunch, she continued to climb and soon realized she had been climbing for nearly four hours. But the trip back would be much faster. For a few minutes she would rest here and let the peace and quiet sink into her bones. Idly, she lay back and looked up into the cloudy sky. Her mind drifted from one random thought to another, as her eyelids slowly closed and she gave up the unequal struggle to stay awake.

The nearby cry of a bird brought her eyes open, and for a moment she couldn't remember where she was. gingerly, she sat up and flexed her cold muscles. Rubbing her eyes, she tried to focus on her surroundings—but in vain. The whole area was shrouded in an impenetrable gray mist. Fog! Fog so dense that she couldn't see more than a few feet around her.

Her first impulse was to try and find her way back down the mountain, but with a sigh she abandoned the notion. Reason warned her that it would be foolhardy at best, and at the worst, a disaster!

Thank goodness she had told Mrs. McNeill, the lodge's cook, where she was

going. If she wasn't back by a reasonable time, surely the woman would send out a search party. She would just have to stay put and wait it out.

Sensible in theory, but as the minutes dragged by, Liza found it very hard not to give way to panic. Scurryings in the underbrush and the muted cry of birds became magnified in her mind.

Then from the distance she heard the sound of a voice.

"Lizaaaaa! Lizaaaaa!"

"Over here!" she called back frantically.

"Keep callinnnnnngggg!"

"Here! Here!" she yelled, filled with an overwhelming sense of relief.

"Call again!" The voice was nearer this time.

"Over here, over here!" she repeated.

Her eyes strained to penetrate the mist, and not until he was nearly upon her did she make out the vague form of a man. Without pausing to think, she threw herself into the man's arms and pressed her head against the warm, living feel of him. Oh, heavenly security after the hours of loneliness! But even as his arms tightened around her, her body stiffened. She knew those arms, the man. No one else had ever brought such a trembling to her body at his touch.

"Garrick!"

"And here I was thinking you didn't know who I was when I received such a warm welcome," he teased.

"I would have welcomed the devil himself at this moment!" she replied tartly, and then relief softened her voice. "Oh, Garrick, I'm so glad you're here! I was so frightened!" The release of tension, the cold, and her fatigue made her succumb to her need of him, and she relaxed into the warmth of his embrace, luxuriating in the feel of his substantial bulk.

It was too late to attempt the return

They were undoubtedly trapped here together for the night. Nobody knew where they were....

trip, but luckily Garrick knew the way to a hunter's cabin. Liza heard the sound of the door opening and stumbled against a small wooden stoop. A few minutes later the bright glow of the lantern he set on a rough wooden table allowed her to see the room. In spite of the Spartan furnishings, never had anything looked so good to her as this primitive shelter.

They heated a can of beans for dinner, and ate ravenously. Afterwards, Liza took stock of their situation. Soberly she realized just how much she was at Garrick's mercy. They were undoubtedly trapped here together for the night. No one knew where they were, or even that they were together.

Unfortunately, Liza's face was very expressive, and Garrick watched the thoughts play across her features, reading them as accurately as though she had spoken aloud.

"Let's get it out in the open, shall we, Liza?" he said ruthlessly. "You're wondering where we're going to sleep, so I'll tell you. We're going to sleep together, right there on that little narrow bed, our bodies pressed tightly against each other." As her face blanched, he laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant sound. "Oh, Liza, Liza, what a wicked mind you have! I hate to disappoint you," he continued sarcastically, "but the objective will not be passion, but warmth."

After putting another log on the fire, he sat down in the chair opposite her. "Tell me," he asked casually, "have you en-

joyed the rehearsals up here so far?"

Their profession was a safe topic, and gratefully Liza picked up the change in subject. She loved her work, and under Garrick's gentle probing she shared her enthusiasm with him.

"You aren't by any chance schizophrenic, are you?" he asked unexpectedly.

"I certainly hope not!" she replied startled. "Why?"

"I'm just finding it very hard to reconcile the two very different parts of your character. I've grown used to thinking of you over the years as a basically cold, unfeeling woman, but you speak of your profession with a warmth and intensity I wouldn't have thought you possessed. A shame you couldn't put a little of that passion into human relationships!" he said nastily.

Liza was too hurt to make any reply. Involuntarily, her eyes rested on the bed. The hour was getting late. Would she be sharing that bed with this man who seemed determined to despise her, or with the understanding, thoughtful companion of their earlier, happier moments?

The question was to be answered far too soon, Liza realized, as Garrick yawned and stretched and stood to replenish the wood on the fire. "We may as well go to bed now," he said abruptly. One by one he began to undo the snaps on his jacket, and she found herself unable to look away from him. He paused as the lamplight reflected the nervousness in her eyes, and his lips twisted into a sneer.

"What's the matter, Liza, don't tell me you're afraid of me! You know that I was never able to resist the pleading in those big, green eyes of yours!"

"Will you stop it!" Liza cried, driven beyond endurance. "How am I supposed to react when you've done your best to make me distrust you? I can't help it if I've never slept . . ."

His lips curled derisively as she stopped abruptly. "With a man?" he finished for her. "That's an unfortunate comment, isn't it, considering what happened that night in Northampton! Tell me, my little ice maiden, just what would it take to turn you into a human being like the rest of us? Hmm? What kind of liquid runs through your veins? Ice water?"

"Please, Garrick, you don't understand!"

"You're right!" he interrupted ruthlessly. "I don't understand! Perhaps you can explain it better in person than you did in that cryptic little note you left on your pillow!"

"Believe me, Garrick, I wanted to see you the next morning and explain, but I was afraid . . ."

"Afraid! Afraid of what? I could understand if I had tried to force myself on you, if I had tried to seduce you for my own selfish pleasure, but you came to me willingly. No, not willingly—eagerly!" he spat. "And then suddenly I found myself making love to a block of wood. But did I get angry? Did I assault you? No! I loved you, Liza, and I tried to understand your fears. I left you alone that night, and how did you repay me? By sneaking off like a thief while I was asleep! Good heavens, Liza, if you had taken some vow of celibacy, why in heaven's name did you lead me on?"

By the time he finished his brutal outburst, Liza was shaking uncontrollably. Her head pounded with an almost intolerable pain.

For so many years, Liza had refused even to think about their unhappy love affair. Now the painful memory could no longer be denied.

Liza was an unusually inexperienced young girl when Garrick entered her life that summer more than eight years ago. Her mother, Evelyn, had kept her away

from men, and taught her to hate and distrust them. Early in her marriage, Evelyn's husband had left her and the years had turned her into a bitter, cold woman.

She drew a shuddering breath of relief when she saw that the cabin was empty.

But Garrick had brought warmth and sunshine into Liza's dreary existence. By the end of the summer Liza had fallen deeply in love. She begged him not to go on the expedition to Brazil where he would write the book that was destined to become his first best-seller. But this was his big break, Garrick had told her. He would marry her before he left, but he could not give up the expedition.

Defying her mother, Liza married Garrick secretly and met him at the Northampton Inn for their nuptial night. But the seeds of doubt her mother had planted took root and undermined her trust in him. In the end she had taken the coward's way out. . . .

Liza lifted one hand to wipe away the tears that ran down her face. She had no strength left, and with a cry like a frightened child she collapsed onto the hard cot they would share that night. Her body felt like one giant, open wound, throbbing with fever and pain.

Garrick reached out to comfort her, cradling her in his arms.

"It's all right, Liza," he murmured. "You're going to be all right." And his hand came up to stroke down her arm. "It's all right, Liza. Go to sleep. Get some rest." His warm breath teased the curls over her ear. "We'll sort things out in the

morning. Everything will be okay; you'll see."

Liza awakened the next morning to bright sunshine pouring in the windows of the room. Where was she? Nothing looked familiar. Gradually, the events of the previous day and night flooded over her, and she shivered with the remembered pain. Slowly she turned her head on the makeshift pillow. The place beside her was vacant, and she drew a shuddering breath of relief when she saw that the cabin was empty.

Ten minutes later, as she was folding the blanket back over the cot, she heard Garrick's footsteps, and deliberately she kept her attention on her task as the door opened.

He watched her for several minutes before he moved to her side. "Liza," he said softly. "Liza!" he repeated loudly when she didn't speak.

Her heart pounded as she finally turned to him.

"Liza, please," he said slowly, "let me apologize to you for the way I treated you last night. I wasn't myself and I lost my temper. I never meant to say all those things to you!"

She steeled herself against the obvious anxiety she read in his face. "We both know that there was a great deal of truth in what you said." She shrugged his hand off her shoulder and turned to smooth the blanket with unnecessary care. "It was a shock, of course, to find that your bitterness runs so deep." Her voice quavered and she fought for control. "I—I had even allowed myself to hope these past weeks that it might be possible for us to be friends."

She turned away so that he wouldn't see the tears that glistened in her eyes.

Before she could prevent him, he turned her around to face him and bent to her. Of their own volition, her lips parted as his

mouth sought hers.

"Ah...friendship. If only it were possible to leave it at that," he murmured. "Could you believe that it was possible for me to have you here alone as we were, to know that we were going to sleep together in each other's arms, and not to want you? But I knew that I couldn't take advantage of you like that; I couldn't violate the trust you had placed in me. But I'm a man, Liza, and I couldn't control the way I felt about you. And that made me angry, so I took it out on you. Forgive me, please!"

"Of—of course," she stuttered. "We were both exhausted and over-emotional."

"Thank you, Liza." And she saw the relief in his face before he turned to a cardboard box he had put on the counter.

"I hope you're hungry," he continued lightly, as though the passionate interlude had never taken place, "because I've caught us a magnificent breakfast!"

They made the trip down in half the time it had taken Liza to climb up yesterday.

During the two days remaining of their retreat, more and more the whole adventure took on the quality of a dream. She found it hard to shake off the effects of Garrick's angry attack on her, and even his explanation and subsequent kiss the morning after seemed a part of a fevered imagination. He had studiously avoided coming near her during the evenings while they relaxed in the recreation room, but a womanly instinct told her that it was a chivalrous move on his part to allow the whispered speculation among their colleagues to have a chance to die out.

Liza, for her part, grew more and more puzzled about what had actually taken place between them.

"All right! Break for lunch!" Teddy called. "Garrick, Arnold has the music ready for the second act...."

The cast relaxed as Teddy's voice drifted off, and he and Garrick moved to a private corner of the room. He had been driving them hard in the week since they returned from Vermont, and the rehearsals had been long and tedious.

Liza knew that Garrick had been tremendously busy lately, but not once had he sought her out to talk—though what she thought she had to say to him she didn't know, she admitted crossly.

By the following week she was showing the signs of sleepless nights and loss of appetite. Friday evening she sat at the table with Bertha, trying to do justice to the tempting dinner that her housekeeper had prepared. Bertha had been with Liza's family since she was born, and cared for her deeply. Liza tried to eat her meal with a modicum of enthusiasm, to please her friend. But soon she gave up the attempt and pushed her chair away from the table. "I'm going to soak in the bathtub, Bertha. Call me if I'm wanted on the phone."

Faint hope of that, she thought crossly. All week Teddy had run them ragged, and she was exhausted. With a sigh she lowered her tired body into the water, and the fragrant smell of jasmine filled the room. Gratefully, she leaned back and rested her head on the edge of the tub. Slowly her eyelids closed over her weary eyes.

Much later she awoke to the sound of the water draining from the tub and the sight of an irate Bertha standing over her holding out a large, fluffy towel.

Liza awakened slowly and reluctantly. She had been having a wonderful dream! "What time is it?" she yawned.

"Half-past nine. And if it wasn't for you freezing to death, I'd have just let you lie there and told Garrick Worth to take himself off."

"Garrick? You don't mean he's here!" Liza gasped, now fully awake.

"Been pacing the living room for the past five minutes."

"I'm sorry, Garrick," she said breathlessly a few minutes later as she entered the living room. "I was in the bath."

"I can tell," he replied, raising a lazy finger to the damp tendrils of hair that curled around her ears. "But you didn't need to get out on my account. I would have been glad to have joined you."

"Garrick!" she squeaked.

"You never disappoint me, do you, Liza? You're glowing like a neon sign."

As her blush deepened, Garrick threw back his head and let his laughter ring through the room. Oh, what a nice sound, she thought.

hand as though to ward her off.

"No, please, Liza." His eyes were like deep, dark pools in which she would have willingly drowned. How foolish she had been in Vermont to think she could escape the attraction she felt toward him. Foolish and futile. As the silence lengthened, she looked at him inquiringly.

"I admit that I hoped this would happen when I came over tonight instead of phoning, but I did have another reason. I wanted to tell you that I have wrangled a couple of tickets for a musical for tomorrow night, and I wondered if you would care to go with me."

"I'd love to!" Liza said breathlessly.

"Good! Shall we have dinner first? I've found a new Greek place over on Third Avenue that has moussaka that is out of this world."

"It sounds wonderful."

Liza felt at a loss for words as she accompanied Garrick to the door. With his hand on the knob, he stopped and turned quickly back to her, catching her by the shoulders and pulling her close for a brief, hard kiss.

By the time Garrick arrived to pick her up on Saturday night, her nerves were raw, and not all her expert skill with makeup could hide the faint lines of strain around her eyes.

As she stepped through the doorway into the softly lighted living room to greet Garrick, he simply stood and stared at her, for once bereft of speech. Then, slowly, as though compelled by some outside force, he started toward her. Liza couldn't take her gaze off the fire that burned in his eyes—eyes free for once of mockery, derision, or even humor.

Neither of them said a word, and when he stood so close to her that she could feel the heat from his body, she raised her arms and clasped her hands around his neck. Suddenly he came alive, reaching

For once his face was flushed and she knew that their kiss had done the same things to him as to her.

Before she could regain her composure, he was beside her once again, and without her knowing exactly how it happened, their arms were around each other and their lips were locked in a long, deep kiss. There was nothing tender or gentle in the embrace. Passion had instantly flared between them, fusing them together in a kiss of such intensity that Liza felt the room spin around her. As quickly as he had taken hold of her, he let her go.

When at last she was able to focus her eyes on him, she could see the telltale signs of his own arousal. For once *his* face was flushed, and Liza knew that their kiss had done the same things to him as to her. As she started toward him, he held out a

out and pulling her in so tight an embrace that her breasts were crushed against the softness of his shirt front. There was nothing gentle in the lips that claimed hers in hungry, demanding kisses. Again and again their lips met and clung.

Liza had no thought of trying to resist his rising passion—it was hers, too. She acknowledged at last that she had given up trying to deny her physical need for his touch, and it was as though a weight had been lifted from her heart, leaving her free and alive for the first time in eight years.

"If I'd known this was the kind of welcome I was going to get," Garrick whispered in her ear, "I wouldn't have bothered with the tickets."

Urgently, Liza felt the need to lighten the mood before she made a fool of herself. "Well," she teased, "I must say that my faith in the American work ethic is restored. I can see that you've really *earned* your reputation with women!"

Somehow or other Liza got through dinner and allowed Garrick to steer her to their seats in the theater.

Once the curtain opened and the play began, Liza tried to keep her mind on the show. Soon the lively music and witty dialogue succeeded in capturing her interest as the plot unfolded. Just before the end of the first act, the heroine began to sing a hauntingly beautiful love song to the man she loved and was afraid she could never have.

My heart burns within me;
My very soul's on fire.
I love you with every breath I take;
You are my heart's desire.

The words seared their way into Liza's mind. *I love you with every breath I take!* *I love you with every breath I take!* She sat as though turned to stone, her heart pounding.

What a fool I am! she cried silently.

What a stupid, stupid fool! I'm in love with Garrick! Why hadn't she recognized the signs before now?

Years ago she had loved Garrick with all the wild, heady infatuation of youth. The seeds of this deeper, mature love had all been there—the sensual passion, the mutual understanding, the liking that came from an affinity of minds. But she had been too young. She could have wept for her own folly for all the wasted years. If she had loved Garrick like this, she never could have left him that night. And now was it too late?

As they made their way out of the crowded theater, she racked her brain, trying to think of some casual comment she could make, but her mind was a total blank. Thankfully, Garrick seemed to expect nothing from her, and respected her silence during the drive home.

Miserable, she lay her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. Lost in her own thoughts, she failed to notice the quick glances that Garrick gave her averted face. Once when they were stopped for a red light, he examined her features carefully, and an oddly satisfied smile twisted the corners of his lips.

Liza only roused herself when she realized that she was nearly home. "I—I'm sorry that I've been such rotten company tonight, Garrick," she murmured.

"I've thoroughly enjoyed the evening," he stated firmly. "But I think this last week you've been overdoing. It's early to bed for you, my dear."

Liza made no protest. She was grateful to let him believe that her strange behavior was due to fatigue. Outside the door of her apartment, he took her gently in his arms. His lips were soft and undemanding as they explored her smooth cheeks, the corners of her mouth, the small dimple in her chin, before he claimed her lips in a

gentle embrace.

Early Monday morning, Liza had just stepped from the shower when Bertha knocked on the door.

"Mr. Worth's on the phone. Do you want to talk to him?" she called.

"Garrick? Tell him I'll be right there!" Not bothering to get into her robe, she wrapped a towel around her and flew into the bedroom to take the call. "Hello," she said breathlessly.

"Hello, Liza?" His deep, rich voice sounded like music to her anxious heart. "I hope I didn't wake you."

Her hand shook at the warmth in his voice.

"I called because I was worried about you," Garrick began. "You looked wrung out Saturday night, and I thought if you weren't feeling well, I could arrange with Teddy for us to work around you today so you could get some rest."

She had no doubt that she could arouse him to passion. The question was: could she arouse him to love?

The concern in his voice was like a shot of adrenaline, and she was suddenly inordinately happy. "Thank you, Garrick, but I'm feeling just fine. I—I rested all day yesterday. You were right. I just needed a good night's sleep."

"That's good. Because I want to see you tonight, Liza," he said quietly. "I've a dinner engagement that I can't get out of, but may I pick you up at nine?"

"Of course," she answered quickly, her heart pounding.

All her doubts and insecurities rose to

the surface as she hung up the phone. Love had come to her swift and hard, but it hadn't made her blind. She knew that Garrick possessed a depth of feeling that he revealed to no one—not even to her. She had no doubt that she could arouse him to passion. The important question was: Could she arouse him to love?

She was ready and waiting when Garrick came to the door to pick her up.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," he said casually when they arrived at his apartment.

Two chocolate-brown, velvet couches formed a conversation area in the middle of the room, and Liza sank gratefully into the deep, soft cushions of one. The unexpected warmth and intimacy of Garrick's apartment had destroyed her last vestige of calm.

A moment later, Garrick pressed a glass into her hands. The thick carpeting had absorbed the sound of his footsteps, and Liza found it very disturbing to suddenly find him so close.

Setting his glass on the coffee table in front of them, Garrick sat down next to her on the sofa, his eyes noting her pallor and tremulous mouth. "Do you want to tell me what's bothering you?" he asked quietly. "Am I wrong in thinking that whatever troubles you concerns me?"

"Don't be silly!" She laughed with a poor attempt at nonchalance. "Why should you . . ."

"That's what I'm asking!"

She reached for her glass and drained it, hoping that he would offer to refill it, but he removed it from her nerveless fingers and set it back on the table. "You don't need any more of that, Liza. Something is bothering you, and I want to know what it is."

His determination sapped her strength and she pressed back farther into the cushions. "I—I just have a little

headache," she whispered. "It's been a long day, but the drink has helped. I'll be fine in a minute."

"A headache?" he mocked. "Well, maybe I can help. Let me kiss it and make it better," he added softly.

"No," she would have said, but the sound was stilled before it was ever born. His lips came down on hers, gently and seductive, pressing her head onto the back pillows. For a moment she tried to resist him, but it was only a corner of her mind that strove for sanity and fought the wave of rapture that engulfed her.

Timeless moments went by as she revelled in the feel of him—his parted lips ravishing hers, his encircling arms, the heaving of his chest pressed against her soft breasts.

Finally, she gathered the strength to pull back.

She ran her tongue over her lips. "You planned this, didn't you, Garrick? My surrender was what you wanted from the beginning, wasn't it?" she asked carefully.

Garrick had leaned to read her face well, and as he saw the knowledge in her eyes, he made no attempt to deny the statement. Instead, his lips curved into a sardonic smile as he dropped back on the couch beside her. Then the smile faded and his face turned cold.

"I think I could have forgiven you for the three days of frustration before we could be married. I could have even forgiven you the fiasco of a honeymoon and your running out on me without giving me a chance to save the situation. But what I can never forgive you for was the brutal end to our marriage! You never gave it a chance! Not one letter of mine did you answer—not even when I sent the money so that you could join me."

His words sent her world spinning. Letters! What letters? She had received no

letters from Garrick—not a note, not a line! He had neither written nor called as far as she knew. Then, with a sinking heart, she realized what must have happened.

Her mother! There could only be one possible explanation: her mother had confiscated his letters to her! She had lied to Liza when she said that there was no way to reach Garrick!

With a sob she raised shaking hands to cover her face. All those horrible, painful weeks and months of waiting and hoping, of praying that Garrick would forgive her and try to get in touch with her, would at least let her know that he was alive!

Her first impulse was to blurt out the whole terrible explanation, but through her tears she saw the look of cold disgust in his eyes. She knew that he, too, was reliving those terrible times, and anything she could say to him now would be futile.

Wiping away the tears, she folded her hands quietly in her lap and asked hopelessly, "What do you want from me, Garrick? What do you intend to do now?"

"My intentions," he said coldly, "are not difficult to guess. You already want me as a woman wants a man. The only difference now is that you know what is going to happen. You may resist at first, but from past experience, I don't think you will protest for long."

Slowly Liza stood to face him. "If you make love to me tonight, then what?" she asked calmly. "What happens tomorrow, and the next day, and the next? Will tonight be enough? Will your sense of revenge be satisfied? If I give myself to you, will you feel that I've atoned for any wrong that I did to you?"

As she stood close to him, she sensed his confusion that kept him silent, and in spite of all the bitter words that had passed between them, she knew that her love

for him had never faltered.

Suddenly, with a bitter expletive, he reached out and pulled her into his arms. "I want you tonight!" he muttered savagely. "Tomorrow be damned!"

She could not suppress the joy in her heart as his lips came down on hers, hard and punishing. There was no love in the kiss, only a deep burning passion which Liza made no attempt to withstand. Her arms entwined around his neck and her lips were open and seeking. Though Liza was beyond hoping that Garrick could ever love her, she could no longer deny her body, clamoring for his touch.

Then as suddenly as he had taken her, he released her.

"What are you trying to do to me?" he cried as he pushed her away from him, but Liza wouldn't allow him to escape. Before he could retreat completely, she raised her hands and began to undo the rest of the buttons down her bodice.

her into his arms and buried his head in the soft hair that cascaded over her shoulders and down her back.

"You're a witch!" he groaned.

And driven beyond his endurance he took the lips so eagerly offered him. Liza drowned in the ecstasy of his kiss, at first rough and demanding and then gentle and infinitely tender as he sensed her complete surrender to him.

Only when she was warm and acquiescent in his hold, did he raise his head to look down into her glowing face.

"What kind of a game are you playing now, Liza? Do you think if I believe you're willing now you know the truth, that it will spoil the pleasure of my revenge?"

"Revenge is a two-edged sword, Garrick," she said, her voice steady now.

"I never stood a chance, did I?" she murmured sadly. "There was never really any hope at all that you would come to care for me again. You made me love you, and soon you're going to be leaving again. I will have to go through the agony of having lost you *twice!* That's your real revenge, Garrick. That's my punishment — and you don't even know it!"

One minute he was holding her in a tight, compulsive grip; the next moment the width of the room was between them. The minutes dragged by while Garrick stood with his hands in his pockets staring out the window into the star-filled sky. Outwardly Liza was calm, but it was a calmness born of despair.

Garrick turned to face her, "Liza, button your dress!" he said harshly as he ran a hand through his already disordered hair. "And get your coat. I'm taking you home!"

Liza lay on the couch in the living room staring out the window. She was proud of the fact that she had managed to get

***"You're a witch!" he groaned.
And driven beyond his endurance he took the lips so eagerly offered to him.***

Garrick's expression was almost ludicrous as he grasped her intention. "What do you think you're doing?" he croaked, his heavy breathing more revealing than anything he might have said.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it, Garrick?" she said huskily. "You wanted to make love to me."

She moved forward as she spoke until she was close enough for the heat of her body to penetrate the thin fabric of his silk shirt. For one stunned moment he froze, and then with an incoherent cry, he pulled

through the last month without making herself ill. She had forced herself to eat, though all food tasted like sawdust to her.

As though by unspoken agreement, she and Garrick met each night at the theater during the previews with every outward sign of friendship. Only Liza knew that he had not spoken to her directly in the month since their confrontation.

*For the first time in her career,
Liza didn't give a damn what
the critics had to say about her.*

Now Liza felt that she was shriveling up inside. Even though *Daphne* was opening tonight, Liza felt no excitement, no eager anticipation. Only a dull listless emptiness. She wasn't even angry at Bertha anymore. In a tearful confrontation, Liza had learned of Bertha's role in keeping Garrick from her. Apparently her mother had convinced her loyal housekeeper that Garrick would surely ruin Liza's life if Liza were to see him again. Obediently, Bertha had hidden Garrick's letters after picking them up at the village post office each morning.

Tears of futility and regret welled up in Liza's eyes. But it was too late now. Eight years too late.

Seated before the mirror in her dressing room late that evening, Liza scooped a large glob of cold cream out of the jar and smoothed it over her face and down onto her neck.

Anyone looking at me, she thought with a grimace, would suppose that the play had been a flop instead of a hit! If the audience was anything to judge by, *Daphne* was due for a long run. Of

course, the final judgment would come from the newspaper critics.

But for the first time in her career, Liza didn't give a damn what the critics had to say about her. There was only one person in this world whose good opinion mattered—and she already knew what Garrick thought of her. Why couldn't she accept the fact that Garrick wanted no part of her? And she refused to dwell on the fact that the opening meant that Garrick would also be leaving for points unknown.

She tried to empty her mind as she wiped the last traces of makeup from her face. Now she had to face the party that Teddy was throwing in his apartment to celebrate opening night.

Carelessly she opened the envelope that had come with the roses she had been handed at the height of the applause.

"From Teddy, I'll bet," she murmured, but her fingers froze as she recognized the writing. "To the *Daphne* of my dreams, Garrick."

Suddenly the nervous adrenaline that had sustained her for the past few hours began to drain from her. The control and self-discipline that had kept her going finally snapped.

So overcome was she with grief that she didn't hear the quiet knock or the sound of the door opening.

White-faced, Garrick stood in the doorway, watching Liza's tortured features. Her flowing red hair concealed her face from behind, but in the mirror he could see her face contorted in pain. Silently, he stepped backward out the door and closed it softly behind him.

Two hours later Liza sat on the couch in Teddy's apartment, a champagne glass held between her hands. She had caught only a brief glimpse of Garrick when she first arrived, and then the spontaneous

applause at her arrival, and the swell of well-wishers demanded her attention.

Liza sighed and leaned her head back against the cushions. She had drunk more than she ought to have and eaten little. Just for a moment she must have dozed, but she awoke immediately when she felt the half-filled glass being removed from her lax hold. Opening her eyes, she blinked away the fatigue—and for the first time that evening she came face to face with Garrick.

"Hello, Liza," he said. Silently he held out his hand to her and pulled her to her feet.

"Come on," he said. "I've made your apologies to Teddy and the rest, and I'm going to take you home."

Too physically exhausted and emotionally numb to argue, she allowed him to fetch her coat.

"When—when do you leave, Garrick?" she asked in the car.

"I—I'm not sure," he said hesitantly. "It all depends."

throat and she couldn't finish the final farewell.

"Good-bye," she murmured with a sob, for one precious moment tightening the hold she had on his hand.

"Don't cry, Liza," he said softly and raised his hand to wipe away the tears with the back of his fingers.

Gently he pulled her into his arms until her tired head rested against the soft cashmere of his coat.

"You don't need to feel sorry for me, Garrick," she murmured against his chest. "I'll be all right."

"It's myself I'm feeling sorry for, Liza. And I'm not sure I will."

Her mind was too confused to sort out his meaning. "You're talking in riddles again, Garrick," she sighed plaintively.

Gently he pushed her away and pressed a soft kiss on her upturned lips. "I'll see you tomorrow. Get some sleep now."

Liza couldn't believe that she had heard him correctly, and she leaned against the doorframe as he went down the stairs two at a time.

Shortly after ten the next morning while Bertha was kneading a batch of bread, the front doorbell rang. As she flung open the door, with doughy hands, she caught her breath in surprise. Looking pale but composed stood Garrick Worth.

"Is Liza up yet?" he asked curtly.

Bertha eyed him suspiciously and closed the door slightly. "Not yet. I gave her a sedative last night, and she should sleep a while longer."

With a shrug, Garrick turned to leave. Some instinct mixed with compassion moved Bertha to add quickly, "But if you're not in a hurry, you can come on in and wait, and I'll fix you a cup of coffee. You look like you could use it," she muttered.

Garrick hesitated for a moment, and with a second shrug moved past her while

Tears had welled up in the back of her throat and she couldn't finish the final farewell.

"Where is it this time?"

"We're supposed to start filming in Burma," he answered tersely.

"Oh, and you have to wait for the monsoon season to end or some such thing!" She laughed uncertainly.

"Or some such thing," he repeated cryptically.

Outside her apartment, Liza turned and hesitantly held out her hand.

"I guess I won't see you again..." Tears had welled up in the back of her

she closed the door behind him.

A few minutes later he stretched his long legs under the table and added cream and sugar to the rich, dark coffee Bertha had brewed. She watched him covertly as he waited for it to cool.

Garrick looked up unexpectedly and caught the housekeeper staring. A mocking smile twisted his lips. "You never liked me, did you, Bertha? I always wondered why."

The old woman flushed to the roots of her gray hair and her hands paused over her work. "I was wrong," she muttered. The apology came hard for her, but in some way it helped ease the guilt she felt. She paused and her eyes pleaded with him unhappily. "Why are you here, Mr. Garrick?"

"Because I love her, Bertha!" he said firmly. "Now will you tell me what's going on?"

The sound of voices roused Liza from her sleep. As her eyes opened slowly, she sighed and pushed the covers down a little. She walked carefully across the room, still a little groggy.

Years of misery and misunderstanding were forgiven and forgotten in the warmth of each other's arms.

As she opened the door into the hall, she heard the sound of voices again and stopped as she recognized Garrick's. He was here—in the apartment! Against all reason, she was sure she heard Garrick say, "Because I love her, Bertha!"

Once more the conversation continued:

"Though I'm not sure that anything that happened in the past really matters," Garrick added slowly. "I've wasted eight

years of my life believing that it did."

Tears of happiness ran down Liza's cheeks as she accepted the fact that it was indeed Garrick speaking, saying all the wonderful things she never expected to hear. He had come to her, he loved her, and he believed in her! On shaky legs she made her way down the hall to the kitchen.

Garrick rose to his feet as he saw her standing in the doorway, the tears still wet on her cheeks.

"Liza!"

He didn't move until he saw her hands reach out to him.

Then: "Liza!" And she was in his arms, his lips on hers, warm and trembling. "Oh, Liza!" he murmured as he held her close. "I love you so much! Can you ever forgive me?"

She let her warm body and ardent lips speak for her as she molded herself into his arms. With one satisfied sigh, Bertha quietly left the room and pulled the door closed behind her.

Much later Liza and Garrick sat together on the couch in the living room. Up till now words had not been necessary, but the time had come when explanations had to be made.

"I couldn't believe it was possible for you to still care for me, Liza," he said, tenderly brushing her disordered curls back from her face. "I thought I had killed any love you might have had that terrible night. Then I saw you crying in your dressing room, and I thought my heart would break."

"Oh, Garrick, I loved you and I was so miserable!"

"And I love you. I've never stopped loving you! For two months I tried to convince myself that I was only seeing you for all the stupid, dishonorable reasons I told you, and fool that I was, I wouldn't admit that I was falling more

and more in love with you by the minute. That night in my apartment I thought I had ruined everything."

"Is—is that why you took me home?"

He kissed her swift and hard on the lips. "You'll never know how hard it was for me to let you go! I wanted you so much, but I wanted you because I loved you, and yet I had burned my bridges behind me and knew I could never tell you that. But neither could I make love to you, letting you believe that my motive was revenge."

Liza pulled herself slightly away so she could look up into his face. "Garrick, do you believe what you said to Bertha—that I didn't intentionally mean to hurt you?"

"I do, Liza," he said solemnly. "I don't know what happened, but I can't believe that you just chose to ignore my letters and forget that I ever existed."

"I never received any of your letters, Garrick," she said quietly. "I had no idea how to reach you!"

Slowly, haltingly, she explained what had really happened. When she finished, Garrick pulled her down onto his lap, and once more all was quiet in the room, the years of misery and misunderstanding forgiven and forgotten in the warmth of each other's arms.

"When do you leave again?" she asked later, savoring the feel of his lips nibbling gently at the lobe of her ear.

"I told the network that I wouldn't begin the filming for at least three months. It won't be a one-week honeymoon for us this time! But even when we begin again, I'll be gone for only a week at a time.

"Do you know," he said teasingly, rubbing his thumb along the smooth line of her jaw, "I'm a little worried about how our marriage is going to affect your performance in *Daphne*."

"What do you mean?" She smiled curiously.

"It's your eyes, I'm afraid. Teddy cast you as Daphne because of their naive, innocent quality. I'm afraid that in another week you are going to have the smug, satisfied expression of a woman who has been well and truly loved!"

"Well, it's not my fault!" She laughed happily. "He'll just have to blame it on the playwright!"

She wound her arms tightly around him and luxuriated in the feel of his hard body against hers. Only for a moment did she turn her lips away from his as she whispered softly in his ear, "Poor Daphne! She never knew what she was missing!" ♥





Deep Waters

Six months on a lush tropical island with the older man she worshipped and was going to marry triggered a buried eroticism in Dallas—for another man!

By LAUREY BRIGHT

George Street seemed even noisier than usual. There had been a time when Dallas had found in Sydney an air of busy purpose that excited her, just as the intellectual aura of the university had stimulated her in a different way.

She turned the corner into Market Street. A breeze sprang from nowhere and lifted the brown hair that brushed her shoulders and whipped her flared skirt above her knees for a moment. As she stood at the side of the pavement she caught an appreciative glance from a man. Carefully averting her cloud grey

eyes from his, she waited for the lights to change, keeping a hand ready to hold her skirt down. Once she practically lived in slacks and jeans, but Gideon preferred her in a skirt.

She saw him waiting for her outside the restaurant. She smiled and waved to him, feeling a surge of pride in his tall, distinguished good looks set off by an impeccable grey suit that matched his close-cropped hair.

He came towards her with his unhurried, confident stride and slipped a hand beneath her elbow. One of the

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things she liked most about him was his unfailing, old-fashioned courtesy.

In the restaurant he held her chair for her. Glancing at the plastic bag she put down, he asked, "Been shopping?"

"Just a woollen jersey. Winter's coming on, you know."

"Yes, I know. But possibly not for us."

Dallas looked at him questioningly, and he laughed. She realized that he was pleased with himself. He wasn't a man who showed his feelings easily, but she saw now the extra brightness in his usually rather expressionless blue eyes and the faint colour in his cheeks.

"I've got some news," he said.

The waiter came over to hand them menus. "Is it good news or bad?"

"A bit of both, perhaps," he said, tantalisingly. "Shall we order first, and then I can tell you without interruptions?"

Not waiting for her agreement, he calmly turned his attention to the menu.

Tempted to seize his arm and demand that he shouldn't keep her on tenterhooks any longer, she curbed the impulse. Gideon had asked her to be his wife because she was a mature and intelligent twenty-six, not a silly teenager who couldn't wait a few minutes for a 'surprise.' From his demeanour she deduced that the news must be mainly good, anyway.

They sipped at fresh pineapple juice while they awaited their meal. This, Dallas thought happily, is the afternoon we're going to pick out our engagement rings. A quick, warm rush of love and gratitude made her move her hand to his.

Gideon smiled faintly as he squeezed her fingers gently before moving his hand away to take up the napkin before him and dab at his lips. How, she wondered, had she been lucky enough to attract the attention of Gideon Pickmere.

Head of his department at the university, acclaimed as the author of several authoritative books on the origins of Pacific peoples, the forty-ish Doctor Pickmere was one of the most respected academic figures in Australia. When Dallas had entered the university as a rather nervous young girl from the outback, she had sought out his popular lectures, quickly becoming one of his most able students.

Of course she had said yes to the Sunday invitation, but then she blurted out, "Why did you kiss me the other night?"

She had been deeply flattered when he had recommended her when she applied for a junior lectureship. She thought he had been slightly put out when she opted for specialisation in the field of linguistics, but he had accepted her decision and always taken an interest in her career. And yet it was only a few weeks ago that she had perceived any hint that his helpfulness was not entirely of an impersonal nature.

In common with many of the first year girls, she had developed a mild crush on "The Great Pickmere" when she was a student. He was not only distinguished, he was handsome in a slightly steely way, and his obvious intellectual ability was a distinct attraction for girls who demanded something more than looks in men.

Even when he had invited her to attend an exhibition of ethnic art with him, she presumed it was because he had an extra ticket. When that was followed by an invitation to dinner, and then to a concert, she was too astonished to be delighted by

the turn that events had taken.

On that third outing, he had kissed her when he said good night to her at the door of her flat. She felt his cool lips on hers, his long fingers gripping her arms, and was too surprised to respond or resist. Afterwards she couldn't even decide if she had enjoyed it.

She had said something of the sort to him eventually, and he had spoken to her then exactly as he always did, with a detached and faintly kindly courtesy. And then he had invited her to his home on a Sunday afternoon. They had been discussing Easter Island over the teacups in the staff common room, and he had asked her quite casually if she would like to come and see some genuine artifacts that he had in his private collection.

Of course she had said yes, and it was while she was holding one of the small carved wooden statuettes that she suddenly blurted out, "Why did you kiss me, the other night?"

"My dear Dallas, you're an extremely attractive young woman. Surely I'm not the first man to succumb to the temptation?"

"You're the last man I would expect to succumb," she said. "I suppose I've always put you on a sort of pedestal."

"Good heavens, you alarm me! Have I—er-fallen?"

"No, of course not!"

"I'm relieved to hear it. I hope you're not expecting me to—er—climb back on my pedestal. I'm not made of stone, you know, whatever you might have thought in the past."

He took the carving and said calmly, "Would it surprise you to know that at the moment I'm not particularly interested in any of the quite fascinating theories about Easter Island?"

He put the carving down very carefully and took her in his arms, waiting for her

to look at him. After a stunned moment, she did. Someone had once called his eyes "iceberg blue." But there was nothing icy about them now. Their colour seemed deeper than usual, and the expression in them echoed the slight smile on his thin, sculptured lips. "I'm only a man," he said, as he bent his head to kiss her, "not a statue."

He proceeded to prove it beyond any doubt. By the time she left his house later in the day, she was under no illusions about that. She still felt vaguely bewildered by his interest in her. At the same time, she couldn't suppress a feeling of wholly feminine triumph, a certain satisfaction in knowing that the unattainable Pickmere found her desirable.

She knew that he kept their meetings discreet, if not exactly secret. Once he almost apologized for it, saying something about the "awkwardness" of knowing what curiosity would be aroused among their colleagues, not to mention the student body, if they were known to be seeing each other frequently. Dallas said hastily that she understood.

Dallas knew that he would have hated to be the target for gossip, and she felt much the same. She did once invite him to have a meal at her flat, but he hesitated, and said, "You share with that Wallingford girl, don't you?" and at her assent he went on, "No, we'll go to a restaurant." She merely nodded in acquiescence.

They were at his home the day that he asked her to marry him. Dallas was sitting on the damask-covered sofa, leafing through a new book on Pacific primitive art, while he poured them both a drink. He brought hers over and put it on a coaster and then wandered over to one of the windows looking out on the street.

She closed the book and picked up the glass, just as he said, "Dallas, will you

marry me?"

She spilled a little of her drink, and quickly moved the book away.

"Me?" she said stupidly.

"Of course, *you*. As a matter of fact, I can't think of anyone better. I realize that you may not feel the same about me...."

"But I do! It's just... I mean, I'm terribly flattered—"

"My dear girl!" He put his glass down on one of the linen doilies and came across to sit on the sofa beside her. "Is this a prelude to, "Sensible though I am of the honour which you do me...."?"

She shook her head, her laughter husky and brief. Gideon took her glass from her unsteady hand and placed it back on the coaster. "Well, stop talking about *flattery* and tell me you're going to marry me."

"Yes," she said, shakily. "Of course, yes."

"That's better. My dear, I'm so pleased." He smiled and kissed her very gently. "Now," he said, "you'd better have that drink. There are certain things which I want to—get out of the way."

His eyes had resumed their normal passionless blue. He said, "You probably know that I've been married before. It's only fair that I should tell you something about it."

"You don't need to—"

"I would rather satisfy any curiosity on your part now."

"All right," Dallas murmured.

It was a familiar story, of a student marriage that hadn't worked. Kaye had been very vivacious and had soon grown bored with his studious habits. In the end, she had even blamed him for her miscarriage...

"It was never the same after that," he sighed. "I couldn't concentrate on my work, and she became more and more neurotic. Eventually we parted by mutual

consent. We've been divorced for nearly ten years."

"Gideon, do you mean we could make it a sort of honeymoon?"

"I'm afraid not. We can't go as a married couple, Dallas."

"I'm sorry," Dallas said.

"You're utterly unlike her, Dallas. There's an age difference, of course, but I remember that even as a young student you were serious-minded, a girl who had a maturity beyond her years. Now you're a woman, and one who can be an intellectual companion to me in addition to... all the other things that marriage implies. It will be nice to come home to someone who understands what I'm talking about. And I've known you for a long time—I could almost say I've watched you grow up. There'll be no sudden disillusion this time."

"No nasty surprises," she agreed. "I could say that about you, too. In a sense I've probably known you longer. I'm sure it took quite a while for you to differentiate me from all your other students."

So they arranged to buy the ring on a day when they had a couple of hours free that coincided and then went out to dinner.

Finally their meals were served. With rising impatience, Dallas watched Gideon methodically fillet his fish.

At last he said, "You've read about the Enigma Island Project?"

"Yes, I read about it recently in one of the journals. Some American philanthropist with an interest in archaeology is planning to finance a team to study the

island's history and its people. It's to be a six-month-long project, the article said."

"It is. And I'm leading it."

Dallas put down her fork. "You didn't tell me," she said. "You haven't even mentioned it!"

"I didn't know until last night. I applied for the job some time ago, but it went to an American. He's had to pull out at the last minute, and they phoned me from New York and asked if I'd be available. I checked with the university this morning. Of course it's awkward, but the prestige of the thing is enormous—nothing quite like it has ever been done before."

"You'll be away for six months." She felt hollow inside. Of course he was excited, it was a wonderful chance for him, but they had only just become engaged. She wished she could feel more pleased about it.

"I want you to come, too," he said, and she looked up with startled hope. "Could I? Gideon—do you mean we could make it a sort of honeymoon?"

A strange expression crossed his face. "Not exactly," he said. "We can't go as a married couple, I'm afraid, Dallas."

"Oh. Why not?"

"It's—complicated. The expedition is being financed, as you read, by Julius Moon. He's stipulated no wives, no hangers-on. The other members of the expedition—all male—are already picked. I can't take you along as my wife. What I can do is insist on having a field assistant, someone who's qualified in anthropology. But if there's a suspicion of any personal relationship, as opposed to a purely professional one, between us—I'm afraid I'll lose the job."

"But we do have a personal relationship," Dallas said slowly. "Couldn't you just say so and add that I'm also qualified for the job?"

"I don't think anyone would believe that, my dear."

"But isn't it a bit—sneaky?"

He looked rather austere. "I never do anything sneaky. I do think that you're the best person for what I want. But admitting that we're engaged is only going to cloud the issue. I think the best solution is to leave the engagement in abeyance for the next six months. Apart from the possibility of my losing this chance altogether, think of the possible complications that might arise if it became obvious to the other men on the team that I had . . . certain privileges that were denied them."

"Don't you think," she said rather carefully, "that simply having me along might give rise to certain . . . assumptions?"

"Of course. There may be some wild guesses made at first; but if we give them absolutely no grounds for their speculations . . ."

"So . . . we're going to give them absolutely no grounds?"

"Absolutely. Don't look so down in the mouth." He patted her hand. "It's only for six months; look on it as going back to the status quo for a while. After all, it was six years before I even so much as invited you to an evening out."

"Eight, actually," she muttered.

He didn't seem to hear her. He took a few mouthfuls of his fish, and said, "It might be better if we returned to the status quo at once. I don't want to be embarrassed by having to prevaricate if I should be asked any searching questions as to our relationship."

"Yes," Dallas said dully. "It's really a wonderful opportunity for you. Forgive me for not congratulating you sooner."

"For both of us, dear," he said.

He smiled absently and added, "Aren't you going to finish your steak? I want my coffee."

She shook her head. "I'm too—excited—to eat."

It wasn't strictly true, but she couldn't think of a better word for her very mixed emotions.

She had a swift impression of taut male strength, a strong, tanned face with amber-coloured eyes and a quick, all-knowing smile.

Enigma was a long-neglected Polynesian landfall between the Marshall and Gilbert island chains northeast of Australia. Recent reports about massive stone images resembling those found on Easter Island had quickened archaeological interest in it.

Dallas found herself overwhelmed by all the preparatory tasks Gideon assigned to her. Through her excitement, however, she was sadly aware that his caresses were mostly plastic now.

On the morning that they left she had had only two hours' sleep. Exhausted, she dozed on the plane all the way to Fiji, where they were to meet the others.

Once through customs, they were met by a burly young man who introduced himself as Max Shepherd, their quartermaster and cook, also a student of archaeology whose varied duties would include helping on the dig. All the members of the team had been chosen for their versatility as well as high qualifications in their specialized field.

Over lunch at the hotel, they met all but one of the other team members. Nicholas Kane, an American social anthropologist who had been working in South America, was due to arrive the following day. The

others were Walter Fraser, a geologist, a stocky man with a curly brown beard and a mat of hair to match; Simon Owen, thin but whippy looking, with a sallow complexion and thinning hair, who had a medical degree and a consuming interest in population studies; Louis de Vere, a lanky, intense-looking dark man who was the botanist; and Hector McNamara, a fierce red-bearded archaeologist "Jock."

Dallas saw that all the men were covertly assessing their new leader, and also that they were wondering about her own status. They were all friendly, however. It wouldn't be long before they got the message from Gideon's casually impersonal manner to her, and deduced that she was exactly what he had called her—a field assistant.

They spent the rest of the day just getting acquainted, and over dinner that night there was even some joviality. Dallas wondered what it would be like being the only woman on an all-male scientific expedition.

The next day she got a taste of it. She was just about to leave Gideon's room to mail some letters she had just typed when she stopped with her hand on the knob.

"I suppose there won't be another chance for us to be alone before we go?" she said.

"No, probably not."

"Then—" she couldn't explain to him her sudden sense of uncertainty, but she needed some small gesture of reassurance. "Then—please kiss me, Gideon, just once."

For a dreadful moment she thought he was going to refuse. Then his rigid pose relaxed. She met his lips with hers, her free arm encircling him. The kiss was soft and unhurried, but when he finally drew away she felt a sickening sense of disappointment. She let him open the door for her. As she passed him, she noticed the

smudge on his mouth, and with a hint of mischief said, "You'd better wipe your mouth, darling. You've got my lipstick all over it!"

A frown of annoyance crossed his face. For a moment she stayed where she was, suppressing laughter and clutching the letters.

She turned away and almost collided with a man who was walking down the hall, a holdall swinging from one hand. She murmured an apology, felt for an instant a hard, steady hand on her arm, and then he strode past her, leaving behind a blurred impression of taut male strength, a strong, tanned face with straight dark brows over amber-coloured eyes, and a quick, amused and knowing smile that had nettled her. It was as though he knew just what had taken place behind the door of Gideon's room and found it very funny.

By dinnertime, she had all but forgotten it, when she glanced up and saw the same man standing in the doorway. She heard a deep voice with an American drawl say, "Doctor Pickmere?" and saw Gideon half rise to acknowledge the greeting.

They all had stopped talking, and were watching the newcomer. They knew, of course, who he was. So did she, although her mind was still saying, "No, oh please no, not him."

But of course it was. "I'm Nicholas Kane," he was saying easily. "Nick to all of you, of course."

The men all shook his hand and introduced themselves. Dallas sat staring at her placemat until an awkward silence fell, and she heard Gideon say, "This is my field assistant, Dallas Thorne."

She looked in his direction and found herself giving a stiff smile while avoiding his eyes. A brown hand with strong, blunt-ended fingers was thrust across the

table at her. He said, "Hi, Dallas," holding her fingers until she raised her eyes. He flickered a swift glance from her face to Gideon's and back again before he released her, his expression so deadpan that he might as well have shouted his thoughts aloud. Dallas felt her mouth tighten as she returned her damp hand to her lap. But he was still looking at her, his eyes following the line of her throat to her low neckline and lingering appreciatively.

Taking her arm, he said, "Tell me, Dallas, are you Gideon's special perk brought along for a bit of private and personal R&R?"

Afterwards, Jock suggested they go to the hotel's nightclub for a last fling before leaving "civilization." To the delight of the others, Gideon said, "Yes, perhaps we should."

Joining several women tourists the men had met earlier, they soon had a big party. Dallas danced with several of them, and just at the point that she was beginning to enjoy it, Gideon leaned over and said quietly, "You don't need to stay, Dallas. Go up to bed if you've had enough."

"I'm having a marvellous time!"

He looked faintly put out. Surely he hadn't meant it as a hint? Sending her to bed as though she were a child?

He turned away with a tightening of his mouth, and she made to touch his arm, then thought better of it. She cast surreptitious glances at him, trying to divine his thoughts. At that moment Nicholas Kane was at her elbow. "My turn, I think," he said quietly. "Since it seems our illustrious leader isn't a dancing man."

She rose reluctantly and went onto the floor, very conscious of a light hand just above her waist, where the low back of the dress left her skin bare. The music was quite fast, but he pulled her firmly to him. "I'm not going to pass up the last chance I might get for six months of holding a pretty girl in my arms."

He was a natural dancer, lithe and rhythmical and giving her a strong lead. When the music changed to a slow number, he brought her a little closer, and she felt his fingers gliding along her spine.

Dallas pulled away and said, "Don't do that, please, Mr. Kane."

He said, "Good grief! *Mr. Kane*? My apologies, *Miss Thorne*! I thought it was to be Christian names all round. Or was that just a reminder to keep my hands off our illustrious leader's property?"

"I am not anybody's property!"

The smile faded from his eyes. "No, of course not. I apologise for putting it so crassly. What should I call you? His girl?"

"No."

He shrugged, then said, "Have you had a lover's tiff?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You *are* a thorny one, aren't you? Why not just tell me to mind my own business?"

"Yes, why don't you? And also stop jumping to unwarranted conclusions."

He laughed and said, "Unwarranted?"

"Yes."

"I'm a scientist, he said. "Trained to assess evidence and draw conclusions."

She made a small sound of scorn, and he said slowly, "Now, let's see. I hear a girl call a man "darling" and tell him to wipe her lipstick off his face. I conclude that she's just kissed him. I see the same girl, got up seductively being totally ignored by the same man. I've watched you

throwing out longing glances at him all evening, when you weren't dancing with every other man in sight...."

"I have *not* been—"

"Oh, yes, honey—you have. So what can I conclude but a lover's tiff?"

"You're insufferable," she said.

"Of course," his eyes gleamed with deviltry, "there is a third possibility. You could have a crush on poor old Gideon. Maybe you threw yourself at him this afternoon, and he's desperately trying to give you the brush-off. In which case it will be interesting to see how he fends you off on an isolated island. Unless, of course, you transfer your attentions to someone else? Wouldn't I do, for instance?"

She said icily, "If this is a sample of the kind of reasoning you use in your research, I can't see that you're going to be an asset to the project. You might have got by on your glamour image until now, but Gideon can see through charlatanism. *He* is truly a brilliant scientist. And get *this*, Mr. Clever Nick—he is not my lover. Whatever you saw or think you saw this afternoon is none of your business, and neither I nor Gideon are obliged to explain it to you. But you're wrong—totally and utterly *wrong* in your conclusions."

She had stopped dancing. "Then why," he asked softly, "did he insist on bringing you along? Originally the team had a leader and six others."

"Gideon needed a field assistant. Do you mind if we sit down now? I've had enough of dancing with you."

"Retiring from the field? I'm disappointed in you, Rosie."

"My name is Dallas!" she snapped.

"Yes, I know, but you're such a thorny little thing, do you really want me to call you by your name?"

"It's better than *Rosie*," she muttered.

"Ah, but a rose by any other name—"

His arm came about her waist, and she felt his lips just touching her temple.

With splintering sarcasm, she said, "How original!"

He laughed. "Okay, it wasn't. I'm trying to make peace."

"Why?" she demanded.

"Because we're going to have to live together in a small group on a tiny island. Team spirit and all that. We all have to get along."

"A pity that didn't occur to you a few minutes earlier. You deliberately tried to make me angry!"

For a moment he was silent, and the humour left his face. "Okay, so I did. It irritated me seeing you casting soulful glances at Gideon, especially since he wasn't returning them. I don't like waste."

"Waste!"

"Yes. You're a beautiful woman, and if he's not interested, I am! Is that plain enough for you?" His face was both mocking and challenging. And there was something in his eyes—a naked sensual awareness that made her instinctively wary.

Her lips still tingled from the unexpected kiss, but what really bothered her was the deeply sensual fire he had ignited in her.

He came closer and took her arm in his strong fingers. Softly, he said, "So tell me, Dallas—are you Gideon's little perk, brought along for a bit of private and personal R and R? Because I'd hate to tread on our leader's sensitive toes."

Jerking her arm from his hold, she said,

"I am a qualified anthropologist and linguist brought along to help Gideon. I am a field assistant, nothing more and nothing less. Nor am I interested in providing perks for any member of the team, including you! In fact, *especially* you! Is that clear?"

Their first sight of Enigma was of a faint blue blotch on the horizon. The pilot landed the seaplane in the lagoon, and by the time a couple of large rubber dinghies were launched, about fifty laughing, excited people were on the beach.

As the dinghies were paddled to the shore, several youths and girls swam out to meet them. They were all wearing saronglike garments. Some of the girls had tied theirs under their arms, but a few had dispensed with such covering above the waist.

There were plenty of willing hands to help carry the provisions and equipment, and before long the research team was standing on the beach surrounded by a pile of bags and boxes.

While Gideon conferred with some of the natives, Dallas sat on a box, feeling hot in her cotton blouse and skirt. She envied the Polynesian girls their unselfconscious seminakedness.

Sensing her discomfort, Nick said, "That skirt you're wearing isn't particularly suitable. You'd be better off in something light and loose, like the local girls."

"I'm sure!"

Nick laughed. "One of the more covered-up versions. Though personally I think you'd look great in something like that!"

He nodded towards one of the islanders, who was wearing only a tapa cloth knotted at the waist, showing a generous length of brown hip and thigh,

and exposed breasts.

Dallas shot him a withering look and stood up as Gideon came towards them. Disregarding Nick, he said to her, "Apparently the headman is too important to come down to the beach. I'll have to go to his house. I want you to come with me."

They were escorted by several of the older men, all of whom crowded into the house when they got there. It was slightly bigger than most of the other huts, but built of the same palm leaves. The floor was covered with woven mats, and the headman, wearing a cotton printed shirt and a traditional kilt of green leaves, was seated cross-legged.

He greeted them courteously and motioned them to join him. He was middle-aged, his body still strong and muscular. The island's language was Polynesian in origin and Dallas found that with intense concentration she could follow what he was saying.

Soon several women arrived carrying coconut shells and a gourd, from which they filled the shells with a spicy-smelling liquid. It looked muddy and uninviting, but they both managed to drink it without showing any distaste.

They left the headman almost two hours later, with permission to build several huts near the beach and to enlist the aid of the islanders, and with the headman's promise to help them to carry out their work.

Back at the beach, the others had changed into swimming trunks and were in the water, accompanied by a group of the island's children.

Nick saw them and came out of the water first. Dallas found herself staring. He had a superb physique, with muscles in all the right places. He had a deep tan, and the tiny bit of stretch nylon he was wearing proclaimed that the tan was complete. On his broad brown chest there was

an odd tattoo mark a couple of inches long.

He saw her eyes riveted on his chest and grinned. "My tribal mark," he said. "I'm a member of one of the last Amazon tribes."

His eyes teased her, and she looked away, stony-faced. Gideon said, "You'd better get dressed. There's work to do before nightfall."

They slept in tents that night, but the next day about a hundred of the islanders turned up. By the end of the day they had erected, amid much laughter and singing, a large hut for Gideon, a smaller one for Dallas, and a long low sleeping hut for the others.

No one was quite sure how the general jubilation at a job completed in record time became a celebration party. After nightfall, against a velvet sky, strange, heavy scents emanated from the darkened lushness of tropical vegetation and the sea hushed at the pale glimmer of the beach. Soon there was a bonfire blazing and an impromptu concert taking place before the visitors, who had been persuaded, with much laughter and good-natured jostling, to take their seats on a specially spread tapa cloth.

Bowls of the mysterious spicy *kava* were produced, and now and then someone would chant a few words of song, which would then be taken up by others. There was dancing, but although the men were virile and noisy and the women graceful, the dances tended to become monotonous.

Dallas taped all of the songs on a cassette and watched the dancers avidly, trying to relate the movements to the words of the songs.

When the dance ended, Nick asked, "How much do you understand of the language?"

"Quite a lot. In a few weeks, I'll prob-

ably be able to follow most of what's said."

"I haven't spoken a Polynesian languages for years," he said. "Will you help me out if I need you?"

After a slight hesitation, she said, "Yes, of course."

She felt his hand on her arm as he said, "Thanks."

Dallas shifted away.

"Don't be so sensitive, Rosie. That was purely platonic."

She whipped her head around, about to make some stinging retort. He was much closer than she had thought, his eyes gleaming in the glow from the fire. Suddenly her mouth was captured by his, warm, insolent and decidedly erotic.

She jerked her head back and he said calmly, "That wasn't."

She looked apprehensively at the other men, but none of them seemed to have noticed. She hissed, "Don't you ever do that again!"

She heard his soft laughter and returned her attention to the singers. Her lips still tingled from the unexpected kiss, but what really bothered her was the leap of purely sensual excitement from deep within her that he had evoked.

*His arms lifted her off her feet,
and his mouth hungrily sought
her breast under the wet fabric
and found its hardened peak.*

The following morning Gideon called them together for a meeting. The aim of the expedition, he said, was to study the island and its people and to probe the origins of the mysterious inland ruins. In the course of doing so, they should frater-

nize with natives only when their research made it necessary. They were, he reminded them, scientists. Looking round at the others, Dallas thought what a superb leader he was—until she caught Nick's sardonic glint.

For the next week Dallas was constantly at Gideon's side. She tried to pretend that her job demanded it, but she knew what she really wanted was some little sign of affection, simply to be touched. But he seldom did.

One evening Nick came to her hut, wearing a short kilt of tapa cloth. He had recorded a chant he wanted her help with, and she asked him to leave the cassette with her.

As he was leaving he noticed that she had a heat rash at her waistband, and suggested she should wear looser clothing.

"As you do?" she asked sharply.

"Yes," he said, then suddenly added, "Come for a swim. Salt water'll do that rash a world of good."

In fairness she would not have turned down one of the others, so why turn down Nick, she thought.

"Give me a minute to change," she said.

"You're fine as you are."

She looked down at the skimpy blouse and shorts.

"I guess so," she said.

There was a moon over the lagoon and the deserted beach. When Nick stopped to undress she gasped audibly, and he laughed and said, "Bark cloth disintegrates in water."

Fortunately he was wearing swim briefs. They ran into the welcoming lagoon.

He left her and Dallas watched the moonlit water burnish his arms and back. She floated on her back, and gradually the hot irritation she had felt all day at her waist subsided, leaving her with a blissful

sensation of well being.

When she had had enough she waded out of the water and stood at the edge. This had been a crazy impulse, but she felt gloriously alive, and it had been worth it.

Nick's hand touched her waist, his fingers trailing across her skin. "How's the rash?"

"I don't know, but I can't feel it anymore," she said. "Thank you, Nick."

He rested both hands lightly on her waist, and she knew that he was going to kiss her. His lips touched hers gently. Instinctively, her own lips moved against his. He looked down at her for a long moment, and then his arms drew her closer to him, and her hands flattened against his chest as he found her mouth again, this time with a demand that she found herself meeting without reserve.

She felt the heat of his body against her bare midriff as he held her. She moved her hand into the thick strands of his hair and squeezed, so that the moisture ran down her arm. As if in answer his kiss became fiercer, making her open her mouth to him. Her hands clutched at his shoulders, as a warm spiral of desire unwound deep inside her.

Her mouth was moulded to the shape of his, and when he stopped kissing it, her lips remained parted, the tip of her tongue touching them agitatedly as though seeking his, her head still flung back and her eyes closed against the dizzy enchantment of unexpected passion.

His arms lifted her almost off her feet, and his mouth went hungrily to explore the curve of her breast, pushing aside the neckline of the blouse, determined to find the hardened peak.

She gasped with a shock of pleasure at the gentle nip of his teeth against her soft flesh. But the knotted blouse frustrated him, and he shifted his grip, tugging at the fastened ends.

Dallas became suddenly aware of what she was doing—and what she was allowing Nick to do. She jerked away quickly. She took a couple of backward steps and as he made to follow said sharply, "*'Don't!'*"

The pool was surrounded by dense trees. Dallas watched as some of the girls swam in sarongs; others shed them and frolicked naked.

He stopped, staring at her in the brilliant moonlight. "*'Don't?'*" he repeated.

"I'm sorry, but I didn't want that."

"You could have fooled me."

"Let's not have a postmortem," she interrupted quickly. "Just forget it ever happened, please, Nick."

"Why should I? It's one of the *nicest* things that ever happened to me. And you were enjoying it, too."

"All right, so I was," she admitted. "But I don't want to take it any further; you'll just have to accept that."

"Tell me why."

"You've only just met me. What happened was simple animal instinct, and we both know it, so don't try and convince me it's the love affair of the century. And don't build your hopes on it, because I don't go to bed with every man I happen to fancy. You'll just have to do without sex this trip because I am definitely not going to oblige you."

She turned on her heels and left him. She was shaking and shivering in spite of the warm tropical night.

Lying on her bed she finally admitted to herself that her fury had been partly an

antidote to her own guilt feelings. She was committed to Gideon. How could she have responded so wildly, so irresponsibly, to a man she scarcely knew and didn't even like?

About a week later they were ready to move inland, exploring the island and seeking out the ruins that had brought them to Enigma. Through the headman a guide was hired to lead them to the archaeological site.

It took them two hours to reach the site, but when they got there everyone felt it had been worth it. The statues, while similar to the Easter Island ones, were intriguing in their own right. Several of them were only partly exposed, and Gideon concluded that the island's manpower would be needed to unearth them. Everyone seemed to agree—except Nick.

When they got back, Dallas undressed for bed, but felt restless and unable to sleep. She got up and put Nick's tape in her recorder, and played the chant over.

She was playing it for the third time when she heard his voice outside. "Dallas?"

She reached for the Chinese kimono she kept for a dressing gown and said, "Come in."

"I heard you playing my tape," he said. "Make anything of it?"

She shook her head, as his eyes slipped over her. They discussed the tape for a while, until he abruptly changed the subject.

"Dallas, how much influence do you have with Gideon?"

"Why should you think I have any?"

He said, "Try to persuade him to go easy on this manpower thing, will you? We could wreck the island's whole economic system."

Her face stiffened. "I'm sure Gideon's well aware of the dangers."

"Why?"

"He wasn't chosen as the leader for nothing! He knows what he's doing."

Nick's eyes narrowed as he surveyed her stormy face. "I know how risky it is to upset a way of life which may be quite precariously balanced. I know from experience, from living in communities where I've seen changes that seem unimportant, maybe even beneficial, create havoc that can never be repaired."

"Hah!" she exploded. "You think you know all about the natives because you run around half-naked and—I'm sorry," she added quickly. "That was stupid. I didn't mean it."

"But you did," he said slowly. "You may be sorry, but you did mean it. Why so worked up, Dallas?"

"I am not worked up!" she snapped, and he laughed.

"Yes, you are. Because I dared to suggest that Gideon might not be quite perfect? Is that it?"

"Don't be stupid!"

"One thing I'm not," he said slowly, "is stupid. There is something between you and Gideon, isn't there? Or is it all on your side?"

"It's none of your business. Will you please go away? I want to go to bed."

"Joining you later, is he? Is that why you turned me down last night?"

"I turned you down because you don't interest me," she said recklessly.

"I don't believe you," he said, capturing her mouth. She struggled, but he had her off balance, her legs sprawled beneath her. Her hands pushed against him, and he moved suddenly, still holding her mouth with his. She felt herself fall, his weight bearing her down. His kiss deepened insistently; his hands slid over the silk robe, feeling the contours of her body, but when she began to hit at him he grabbed her wrists and held them.

The powerful persuasion of his mouth

on hers went on until she began to feel dizzy. With an effort she clamped her teeth shut and made her body go rigid with resistance. His mouth became fierce with anger, bruising her lips, and when he lifted it she saw that his face was flushed; his eyes glittering.

Her voice low and hard, she said, "Get off me, or I swear I'll scream!"

His mouth went tight and for an instant his eyes challenged hers. He freed one of her hands and his fingers ran lightly over her breast. Her open palm caught his cheek in a stinging slap, her eyes blazing. Nick grinned tautly and let her go, getting to his feet in one lithe movement.

He stared at her as she tried to pull the kimono down below her thighs, then turned and walked out.

As the weeks wore on, it became necessary to create a second camp at the digging site. Gideon, Dallas and Nick, however, spent most of their time at the beach camp. Gideon had to coordinate the logistics of both spheres of activity, while Dallas had to assist him and run the beach camp.

Nick spent most of his time with the natives, observing their daily life by taking part in it. He even bartered for some printed calico for Dallas, from which she made herself a sarong.

One day Simon said, "Have you noticed that the young girls rarely swim?"

A startled Dallas realized that was so, and volunteered to try to find out why.

It wasn't difficult. She had cultivated the friendship of one young girl who had shown a shy interest in her. Mafoata, whose name meant "dawn," giggled when Dallas enquired as to why the girls were seldom seen swimming. The explanation was a simple one. The girls had a special fresh water pool all to themselves in the privacy of the forest. It was a long-

established custom that girls of marriageable age gathered there to swim.

Mafoata was delighted with the idea that Dallas would join them.

The pool was surrounded by dense, glossy evergreen trees. It was fed by a waterfall from a clear stream. A series of natural steps led to the top of the waterfall, and some energetic young women were jumping, squealing, into the deep water.

"You were spying on me, weren't you? Of all the despicable tricks! Why, you're nothing but a dirty-minded Peeping Tom!"

Some of the girls retained their sarongs, others discarded them and frolicked quite naked. Dallas took off her sarong and slipped into the water in her bikini. She knew the girls were watching her with guarded interest, and when she came out and sat alongside Mafoata, some of them ventured close. The fact that she could speak to them in their own language soon broke the ice, and the less shy ones asked her questions about herself.

One of them said, "Is none of the men with you your husband?"

"None of them."

"But we have seen you cooking for these men!"

"Yes," Dallas admitted nervously.

"You cook for a man and he does not take you to his house? He does not spread his net for you?"

She said feebly, "One of them gave me a *pareu*." She indicated the discarded sarong.

"Ah!" Mafoata said hopefully. "He

shares his sleeping mat with you?"

"No," Dallas said lamely.

She went to the pool often after that, and was soon accepted as a "regular." she noticed that the girls often teased each other about boys, but especially when someone had stripped naked. That seemed to be a signal for the others to call out the name of a particular boy who presumably the girl favored.

On the way back from the pool there was an outcrop of rock where the young men would gather to watch the girls go by. Most days there would be several boys sitting on the rock as the girls walked along the path; never looking upward. Dallas noticed that the girls always walked single file.

She was returning one day behind a pretty girl called Fiatama, when a crimson blossom sailed down at the island girl's feet. The girl stopped walking and looked up. Dallas followed her eyes to the small group of boys. One of them was keenly watching Fiatama, and the girl scooped up the flower and tucked it behind her ear.

The young man leaped from the rock to land lightly before the girl, his face split by a wide smile. Dallas saw Fiatama duck her head shyly, and then the two walked on side by side in silence.

Mafoata whispered excitedly, "Fiatama is lucky. She will share Nopera's sleeping mat tonight."

When Dallas reported the day's events over dinner, the others were fascinated. Then they asked Dallas if she knew why there was so little pregnancy among the young girls. She said she didn't know. Simon suggested that a young virile male would find out soon enough.

"Why don't *you* try?" Gideon said to Nick with scarcely veiled contempt.

Nick said evenly, "I'm over thirty. A bit old to be accepted by a group of boys."

scarcely out of their teens. But I'll see what I can find out, if you like."

In the days that followed Dallas saw less and less of Nick. He had moved in with an island family and seemed to be giving her wide berth. At first she was relieved, then annoyed when she saw him in the company of one of the island's beautiful widows. While typing some of Gideon's endless reports, she realized she resented "Niki," as the islanders now called him, for "going native."

Hot, and annoyed with herself, she decided to go for a swim.

The girls welcomed her back and she slipped into the refreshing water with a deep sigh. It was the first time she had bathed completely naked, and she revolved in the caress of the clear water over every inch of her skin. After a week of feeling hot and sweaty all the time, this was a taste of heaven.

They were passing the boys' rock on the way back when a crimson flower dropped in front of her feet. Surprised, Dallas stopped dead. There were several young men there, but the one standing up, his eyes challenging hers, was Nick.

For a second she felt a surge of sexual pride, purely primitive. He was affirming in front of witnesses that he wanted her, just as Nopera had done to Fiamata.

But his confidence upset her, triggering her anger. He hadn't for a minute thought she would pick up the flower, of course. He was just telling her again that he didn't believe she wasn't attracted to him.

Deliberately, she brought her foot down on the scarlet petals, and walked on. She heard the shocked, "Aiee!" of his companions, and the gasps of the girls behind her.

Wandering into camp some time later, Dallas discovered that she was late for the evening meal. She took a plate from Max

and sat down, and only then realized that Nick had joined them. He was lounging on the ground, his back against a log and his eyes resting on her with an unfathomable expression in them. She looked away.

Simon said, "You're late, Dallas. Couldn't drag yourself away from the pool?"

Dallas looked up and smiled slowly. "I've been learning about the birds and the bees," she said. "And sleeping mats."

Carefully skirting the flower incident, she told them about a discussion about love and living arrangements that she had overheard. They congratulated her on having gained the confidence of the girls, then one by one went off to bed.

Dallas found herself alone with Nick, who hadn't moved. In the gathering dusk, his eyes gleamed from beneath half-closed lids. He had been sitting exactly like that while the others had listened to her recital. With sudden intuitive knowledge, she said, "You already knew all of that, didn't you?"

"Most of it," he admitted. "Do you think I'd have offered you a flower if I hadn't been aware of its significance?"

"I'd rather not discuss it," she said coldly.

"Come for a walk. We'll pool our facts."

She took his hand automatically, letting him help her up, but when he held it, she pulled away.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," she said.

"We have to work together," he said. "You can't avoid me forever. Come on." His hand fastened on her arm, almost forcing her to walk beside him. "Stop quivering, and relax," he said. "I got the message when you trampled my poor flower."

"Why did you throw it?" she asked.

"You surely didn't expect me to pick it up?"

He took away his hand and dropped an arm about her shoulder. He said, "They dared me to throw it. You'd given the signal, after all."

"What? What on earth do you mean?"

"You know what I mean, Dallas. You were swimming nude."

"I notice everything about you." The words, and the intent look on his face, lingered in her mind and kept returning for days.

Shock was followed by a slow understanding. "You were spying on me, weren't you? Of all the despicable tricks! You're nothing but a dirty-minded Peeping Tom!"

She didn't realise that his silence was due to incredulous surprise. At last he said, "Are you telling me you didn't know?"

"Know what? That you were skulking around the girls' pool, ogling us?"

"Dallas, you incredible little innocent. The girls know quite well that the boys are watching them. There's a special tree that overlooks the pool, and the boys climb up there and... I thought you knew. You seemed to be in the girls' confidence."

She hadn't, but now it was blindingly clear. If she'd had her wits about her a bit more, she might have guessed at something of the sort. Recalling the teasing, the modesty of some of the deliberate flaunting of their nakedness by others, she mentally castigated her own stupidity. She should have realized that it was part of their elaborate courtship games.

A wave of heat washed over her and she

glanced up at Nick. She realized that he was trying not to laugh.

She snapped, "I'm glad you think it's funny!" and moved blindly away.

She was nearly at the beach when Nick came up behind her and she felt his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Dallas," he said, sounding quite sober. "Of course it isn't funny if you were embarrassed. I just hadn't expected you to be so upset."

She shrugged and said with resignation, "It was just so unexpected. You must have had a terrific time."

She could feel the warmth of his body behind hers, and his hands tightened fractionally. "I can't say I didn't enjoy watching you," he said. "I found it hard to maintain a proper attitude of scientific detachment."

"You might have told me before. How often have you been there?"

"Today was the first time. I didn't realize that the girls swam nude there. I doubt if I'll be joining the boys again. Being an outsider, it does make me feel rather like a Peeping Tom, even though the girls expect it."

His hands moved over her smooth skin to an itchy lump near her elbow. "It's an infected bite, isn't it?" he said. "You've been scratching and rubbing at it all day. Get Simon to look at it before it turns into something worse."

"Yes, I will," she said mechanically, staring at him. "I didn't realize anyone had noticed."

"I noticed," he said quietly. "I notice everything about you."

I notice everything about you. The words, and the intent look on Nick's face, lingered in her mind and kept returning days afterwards. She knew that he didn't stare at her anymore the way he used to, that he even kept out of her way. And yet it was as if he could see her without looking at her, could sense her presence, her

moods.

She found it disturbing to think about, and so, finally, she simply pushed it out of her thoughts and "kept busy" instead.

As the digging progressed, more and more of their time was spent at the island site. And after each torrential rain the sandflies were relentless. Dallas, who was fair, suffered more than the others.

Then one day she suddenly felt weak and dizzy. When she lay down in the shade she heard the others talking in low voices. Then Gideon's face was hovering over her, and she realized it had been a long time since he had even kissed her.

He was telling her that they had decided to send her back to the beach camp with Nick.

Nick helped her up and they slowly made their way down the path. They were about half way when she realized that the path had gone suddenly dim, and a peculiar little gust brushed by them.

Nick said, "I think we're in for a squall!"

Caught in passion's grip, she wouldn't have cared if he had taken her on the muddy ground or against the wet tree as long as he—

They heard it sweeping over the trees, a hurled mass of driving tropical rain. Nick grabbed her hand and ran for the shelter of a banyan tree, its aerial roots supporting a thick canopy of leaves, but the rain was already soaking them.

He pushed her ahead of him, and she leaned her back against a column and turned to face him, her hair plastered to

her wet cheeks. She pushed it back, panting and laughing, and saw the rain glistening on his skin, and soaking his shorts.

Her own shorts were wet, too, and the loose shirt was clinging to her body.

Nick stood close, trying to shield her. He was carefully not touching her, his hands braced against the trunk, but she could feel the heat of his body.

She saw the anxiety in his eyes and gave him a small smile. His hand moved, sliding to her shoulder, and involuntarily, she turned her head to the side and briefly laid her cheek against it.

"Dallas!" he said hoarsely.

Shocked by her own action, she moved abruptly, moving away from him. She wouldn't meet his eyes.

His hands held her, first on her upper arms, then sliding up to her face until she had to look at him. His fingers were in her wet hair, and she felt them shaking. His eyes blazed into hers.

His lips touched hers, and for a long moment there was nothing else, just the touch of his mouth against hers. Dallas's whole being tingling with the feel of his hands, his mouth. The rain pounded, and she tasted it on his lips as at last he moved them gently against hers, feeling her answering movements, then, very slowly, deepening the kiss until their mouths opened in mutual need and passionate exploration.

Her fingertips brushed across his rain-slick chest. She felt him shudder, and with a rush of sensual elation, she deliberately laid her hand against his pounding heart.

The kiss became almost savage, his tongue invading her mouth. His fingers dug into her waist, and she made a muffled sound of pain and pleasure. She knew an agonised second of waiting, and impatience made her close her teeth on his lip when he drew his mouth away. Then his hands slid inside the loose, wet shirt, and

even before they curved around her thrusting breasts she had arched herself against him and was feverishly inviting his repossession of her mouth.

The downpour had cooled the air, but she didn't notice because a hot tide of desire was invading her body. She was shaking with it, her breathing hard and uneven. When he wrenched his mouth away, she moaned, her parted lips seeking him.

He pushed her back against the tree, and she gave a hoarse, abrupt gasp as his thigh thrust between hers. She clung to his shoulders, her mouth against his skin.

And then suddenly he stopped, and she heard herself whimpering. He was asking her if she wanted to make love, right then and there. Confusion and rage filled her. What did he think she was? Did he really think she would lie down in the mud like—like an animal?

In a convulsive movement, she threw herself backwards, her spine colliding with the trunk with bruising force. Her eyes widened with horror as she looked at him, and she turned away, hiding her face, her shoulders hunched as she heard herself making a series of sobbing, choking sounds.

His hand touched her shoulder.

She jerked violently away from his touch and said harshly, "Leave me alone!"

She sank her teeth savagely into her lower lip and with a tremendous effort stopped the sounds fighting their way from her throat. They reminded her of the other small sounds that she had made before, as Nick made love to her.

Nothing like this had ever happened to her. Never in her life had she been so caught in the grip of passion that she lost all sense of time and place—and person. Only a few minutes ago she had been practically demanding that Nick take

her—here, in the open, in the middle of a rainstorm, alongside a public pathway. She wouldn't have cared if he had pushed her down on the muddy ground, or against the wet, scarred bark of the tree, as long as he—

*Even before the cord was cut
the baby was at her mother's
breast. Dallas felt an ache of
longing in her breasts and
stomach.*

"No, no, no!" her mind said. She wouldn't have. She couldn't. She belonged to Gideon. She was committed to Gideon. And she had just come within a hair's breadth of begging Nick to make her his.

She felt sick with self-loathing. She heard him asking her if she was all right.

With an effort, she nodded, turning slowly round, keeping her eyes on the ground. She said, "Can't we just keep walking? We're already wet, and it isn't going to stop, is it?"

"If that's what you want," he said, after a moment.

They walked nearly the rest of the way in silence. When they were within sight of the camp, Nick took her arm and stopped her, saying they should talk about what had happened.

She shivered in his grasp. "Nick, I'm cold and tired, and I want to go to bed and sleep forever! And I never, *never* want to think about what happened today again. Just...go away and leave me *alone!*!"

"Okay," he said, his face softening at the angry, bewildered grief in hers. "I will. But nothing is going to stop you

thinking about it, honey. You won't be able to help it, any more than I will."

Miserable and sick, Dallas kept to her hut for the next few days, avoiding both Gideon and Nick. She tried to blot out thoughts of both by concentrating on deciphering the picture writings they had discovered at the digging site. Gideon was busy directing the raising of the fallen statues with the help of the natives. Nick was staying away from the coastal camp altogether.

Supplies arrived by freighter, which marked the midpoint of their stay. To celebrate, they all got together at the beach camp for the weekend. On Friday, after their evening meal, Dallas and Gideon were sorting notes in his hut when Nick came in. Excitedly he said, "I need Dallas."

Dallas felt as though she had received a blow over her heart. Gideon's head jerked a little in surprise, and Nick laughed.

"One of the women is having a baby," he said. Dallas started to say, "But I don't—"

"No," he interrupted, "you don't have to play midwife. Listen." He turned to Gideon. "The husband has to call on three witnesses. He's named me as one of them. But in fact men are barred from the proceedings. The witnesses sit outside and appoint a female proxy—a sister or wife, to help with the birth. It's got to be Dallas."

Gideon said, "It's a unique opportunity, Dallas. You'd better go."

Nick looked at Dallas and said, "Do you need anything? Can we go?"

She shook her head. "I'm ready."

They scarcely spoke on the way. She felt he was moderating his pace for her, and she tried to hurry until he touched her arm and said, "Don't panic. It's a first child. It could be hours yet."

"Have you ever seen a birth?" she asked.

ed.

"A couple of times."

"I haven't."

"Don't be scared. It's marvellous. Tough at first, but marvellous. You'll be all right."

"It isn't me that's having it!"

When they reached the huts the deep shadows on the moon-silvered ground almost hid the subdued bustle.

Nick sat outside with the other young men. Dallas was ushered into the small hut where several women had gathered about a girl who was lying on a clean new woven mat.

In the hours that followed it seemed to Dallas that she moved from her own familiar world into a totally different one. She was relieved to see that the girl was smiling, apparently unworried. A look of intense concentration would occasionally cross her face, and silence would fall while she directed all her energy to the mysterious process taking place within her body.

Later, when the contractions increased, Dallas felt her emotions pass from pity because the girl looked so young, to admiration for her woman's strength, and then to empathy as she took her turn at holding the girl's clutching hand.

At the climax the young mother was raised to lean against her friends, who supported her as she pushed her baby triumphantly into the world.

They lowered the mother gently, and even before the cord was cut the baby was in her arms and nuzzling impatiently at her breast. Dallas experienced a sudden ache of longing in her own breasts and in the pit of her stomach. The tiny hut was filled with a sense of elation and only now did she realize that it was pouring.

She thought of the men outside, and wondered if they still sat there. She thought of Nick telling her not to be frightened, and she wanted to run out and

tell him that she had just been through the most wonderful experience of her life.

When the men were allowed in, Dallas met Nick's eyes and smiled. Following the others, he knelt by the sleeping mat and spoke to the mother.

The hut reverberated with laughter and congratulations. Nick made his way to her. "Well?" he said, putting an arm around her.

"You were right. It was marvellous."

His skin was wet, his hair sleek and shiny. Dallas laughed and said, "Have you been sitting in the rain all this time?"

"We had some woven cloaks, but they didn't keep it all off." His arm tightened, and he said, "You can't go home in this. Come to my hut."

She looked at the baby, whose father was now bending over his wife, his hand touching hers as they adoringly watched the small miracle they had created.

"Come home with me, Dallas...and share my sleeping mat."

She felt the beat of his heart against her bare arm. She could smell the rain on him, mingling with the faint, sharp scent of his masculine sweat, and a subtler, musky, underlying aroma. She turned her head slowly and rested it against him, her breathing shallow while her lips parted, touching his wet skin, drinking in the raindrops that still ran down his shoulders and chest.

"Yes," she said quietly.

She felt him shiver slightly and smiled to herself. She was calm and controlled. She half closed her eyes and took a deep breath. There was no hurry.

They stood there for a long time. Nick had made no move because, like her, he wanted the exquisite anticipation to last, because he knew, as she did, that every moment they stood there so still, and yet so close, they were growing in their finely tuned awareness of each other, their

mutual need a tenuous, silvery thread that vibrated between them.

Then Dallas's body slumped against him in surrender, and she felt his powerful grip, and his voice said thickly in her ear, "Come on. We're going."

When she felt his nakedness against hers, she sighed in unashamed delight, and when at last he claimed her, it fuelled her own passion.

They ran, laughing and gasping, soaked and streaming with water by the time they got to his hut.

He left her just inside the doorway and went to light the lamp. He rummaged among some piled clothing, coming up with two towels. He tossed one to her and began to rub his hair and face with the other.

Dallas was standing with the towel in her hand, a small smile curving her lips as she watched him. She could still see some tiny droplets of rainwater cascading down his thighs below the soaked cotton *pareu* that clung to his lean hips.

He dropped his towel and came toward her, taking hers from her unresisting hands and slowly drying her hair, pulling her head back so that she could look at his absorbed face while he did it.

He draped the towel over her shoulders and said, "Show me your hand."

She gave it to him. She turned her palm against his mouth. Lifting her other hand, she stood with her fingertips touching his waist, her face raised to his.

His mouth wandered over her face, chasing the last raindrops on her skin, tasting and tantalising. The towel drop-

ped from her shoulders as his lips reached them, and his fingers found the knot of material between her breasts and loosened it until the strip of fabric followed the towel and lay at her feet.

He placed his hands on her smooth hips, just above the tiny bikini pants and watched the quick rise and fall of her bared breasts before he pulled her to him, and met her parted mouth with his.

She was overwhelmed by erotic sensation. Her skin burned and a deep inner fire licked at her. A glimmer of regret for the slow, deliberately paced arousal that she knew they had both anticipated swiftly died in the conflagration of desire.

When his mouth released hers from its willing bondage, she dug her fingers into his back, feeling a slight movement away from her. His voice in her ear was low and clear. "Dallas," he said "I'm not using anything. I don't want to... do you?"

"No," she said, her reply instant and decisive. Once she had told him that for her it had to be love, and now he knew that it was. For a moment she looked up directly into his eyes, and saw that they understood each other. Then her mouth was seeking his, and there were no more decisions. They had all been made, it seemed, long ago.

When he finally lowered her gently to the blankets that lay on the wide woven sleeping mat, she was wild with wanting him. Even before he had slid down by her side, her shaking fingers had undone the knot that tied the *pareu*. When she felt his nakedness against hers, she gave a long sigh of unashamed delight, and the triumph in his face when at last he claimed her, watching her face for her reactions, only fuelled her own uninhibited passion.

Morning came too soon, and the cool light of day had to be faced. Dallas carefully moved away from Nick's side.

Deftly she slipped into her panties and wound her *pareu* sarong-fashion about her body.

Nick stirred, and his sleep-thickened voice said, "What are you doing?"

She said, "I have to go back, Nick."

"I want you to stay."

"I know. But I must get back before—"

"Before Gideon finds out where you spent the night?"

"Yes," she admitted.

"You made a commitment last night."

"You're forgetting, I already had a commitment to Gideon."

"*Damn* Gideon!" he said, and she heard the pain behind the fury. "You can't go back to him. You don't love him."

She turned her head to meet his lips softly with hers and said. "Not as I love you." Steadily, she said, "I've loved Gideon for eight years, Nick. It doesn't stop just like that."

"You just said you don't love him as you love me. What are you trying to do? Have your cake and eat it, too?"

"Don't sound so suspicious. I can't marry Gideon; I know that."

"Because you might be pregnant by me?"

"Because I love you...more completely and more passionately than I could ever love Gideon. But I won't hurt him any more than I have to, Nick."

"Is he capable of being hurt?"

"Don't be cynical. He's human, like the rest of us."

"Okay. I accept that. But you've got to tell him about us."

"Not necessarily. He needn't know about—last night. Please, Nick," she added. "Let me handle this my way."

"I'll take you back."

"No," she said. "I'll go alone—now."

"While it's still dark? Sneaking in as

though you're ashamed?"

"No. Sparing Gideon's feelings."

"You're very careful of Gideon's feelings. What about my feelings? How do you think it feels to have the most beautiful thing in my life turned into some sordid hole-in-the-corner affair that you're ashamed to admit to?"

"You're being unfair!"

"Maybe. Okay. Okay, do it your way. Creep back into camp and pretend you've been sleeping all night in your own little bed. But if you don't tell Gideon what's happened, I will! Understand?"

"I understand that you don't trust me," she said coldly. "Or do you just want to see Gideon hurt? Isn't it enough that you've won?"

"Do you really think I'm that petty? If you genuinely have any feeling for the man, you'll treat him like one, not like some child who has to be protected from the coarser facts of life."

"I suppose that when a couple is in the throes of passion, it's too much to expect them to take elementary precautions."

"All right," she said quietly. "I'll tell him. But I won't humiliate him any further, Nick. I won't...sleep with you again as long as we're on this island."

The silence was thick with unspoken thoughts. The growing light from outside fell on his face, making it look unyielding. At last he said, "That's your decision."

"Do you accept it?"

"It takes two," he said. "I won't force you."

She bit painfully on her lower lip. He knew perfectly well what she meant. How

had they come to this, after their wonderful closeness of the night?

He pulled her into his arms. His kiss was fierce and unforgiving, but she met it with an answering fierceness of her own. Some of their mutual anger and hurt drained away.

But eventually she slipped away and hurried back to the camp. She waited until she knew that Gideon had been out for his morning dip. Then she changed into a blouse and skirt and went over to his hut.

She knew as he glanced up at her that he had guessed anyway. Her courage almost failed her when he said, "It was a long labour, I take it?"

"It was, fairly. But—Gideon, I have to tell you something."

If she hadn't known him so well, she wouldn't have been aware that he braced himself. The change in his stance, his expression, was almost infinitesimal. She had to clench her teeth for a moment before she could continue. "I spent the night with Nick."

He betrayed nothing, not a flicker of emotion. She watched him with fascination, now wanting to look at him, but unable to tear her eyes away.

At last he spoke, his voice quite colourless. "Naturally I'm very disappointed in you, Dallas," he said.

He sounded as though he was giving her a grade on an essay. *Disappointed!*

"I'm very sorry, Gideon," she said. "I know it would have been a great honour to be your wife, and I'm sorry I've not been worthy of it."

How pompous she sounded, like Gideon at his worst!

"Do I take it that you intend to repeat this rather sordid little exercise?"

Anger rose and she fought it down. He was entitled to display a little spleen; he felt wronged and insulted, and it was her fault.

"No. I've told Nick it won't happen again as long as we're on the island."

He seemed to unbend just a fraction. His eyes flickered over her face, and he said, "I see. You must think I'm a very unforgiving man, Dallas."

She realized that the faint light in his eyes was hope, and felt sick with guilt and pity. His thin mouth curved in a small, gentle smile. "Of course it's a blow," he said, "but have you forgotten that I love you?"

He had never said that before, and now it was too late. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I'm afraid you don't understand, Gideon. I may be pregnant."

For the first time a note of bitterness entered his voice. "You're very honest, my dear. I suppose that when a couple is in the throes of an uncontrollable passion, it's too much to expect them to remember the most elementary precautions."

"It wasn't like that—"

"No? Pardon me, Dallas, but I don't really want to hear what it *was* like. Spare me the details."

She flinched from the cold sarcasm, but was perversely almost glad that he was showing signs of anger at last. She stood silent before him, feeling like a chastised child.

"Obviously you realise that I couldn't accept another man's child as mine. Still, it's less than two months before we'll be back in Australia. By then you'll know, and it may not be too late to do something about it. There might still be a chance for us."

She stared at him with disbelief. "I couldn't—You must realize that whatever happens, I can't marry you now. It's not *possible*!"

"I know how you feel," he assured her. "But at the moment you're overwrought, and I must confess that I'm not sure of my own feelings. I suggest we both do some

thinking."

"No! Gideon, I—"

He held up his hand to silence her. "I refuse to discuss it any further at this point, Dallas. We're not going to get anywhere, and we both need time to think."

"I don't! Gideon, I *cannot* marry you!"

"See how you feel about it in a few weeks time," he said, with a wintry smile. "By then you'll know one way or the other, won't you?"

She started to say, "I know now!" and paused, realizing that he had meant something else. Instead, she said, "It won't make any difference—"

He had picked up a sheaf of papers and over her voice he said, "Excuse me, I want to see Jock about these." And then he simply walked out the door and left her standing there.

All weekend Dallas brooded over how she could convince Gideon that it was over. But her mind seemed to go round in perpetual circles and never came up with a viable solution.

Finally one night she slipped away to see Nick. He greeted her with hostility and suspicion. "You've had the whole weekend to lay it on the line for him."

"I did!"

"Oh, you made a pretty little confession, all right. You must have done it beautifully. He's still willing to marry you. What a lucky little girl you are!"

"Nick!" She stepped back from him, too upset to wonder how he knew what Gideon still felt for her. "I'm not going to marry him," she said shakenly. "You know I'm not!"

"Isn't it about time you told *him*?"

"I have!" she shouted. "It's not my fault if he won't accept it!"

"You have," he said flatly. "It seems to me that if a girl really means it she

shouldn't have too much trouble convincing a man that she doesn't want him."

"I tried, Nick. Believe me."

His eyes were cool now, and assessing. "He warned me off," he said. "Did you know?"

"What?"

"He came to see me yesterday, and said you'd told him all about the "unfortunate episode," and that you wanted nothing more to do with me. He seemed sincere."

"I'm sure he was," she said. "That's how he insists on interpreting it. He had no right—"

"He seemed to think he had every right."

"Nick," she said, "please believe me."

"I want to believe you, Dallas," he said, the pain in his eyes a mirror of hers. "But Gideon was damned convincing, and much as I dislike him, I don't think he's a liar."

"But you think I am?"

"No!" he said explosively. He reached for her, and she went into his arms. He held her closely, his lips on her neck, his husky words of apology muffled.

"We have to trust each other, Nick," she said softly. "You don't know Gideon. He can't comprehend what's happened, what I tried to tell him. In time he'll have to understand and accept it."

"You're still trying to spare his feelings, aren't you? You broke it to him so gently that he's still hoping to patch things up."

"I suppose I did. I can't be brutal to him, Nick. If he was less-less chivalrous, less good—"

"There's one way of making sure he gets the message. Stay with me. Live here, with me."

She felt his heart beating against her breast. "I can't do that," she said. "I gave my word."

"To him?"

"You've no reason to be jealous," she

said. "And no right. You know I love you."

"Will Gideon's rights and pride always come first with you?"

"You're not concerned with those things. He is. Trust me, Nick. I trust you enough to have your child, remember?"

"I remember." He took her hand and kissed her palm. "But don't you forget me," he said softly.

The days passed slowly now that the air of excitement that had stimulated the team early on had waned. They had gone as far as they could at the dig, and they were all busy writing up notes on their separate studies.

Dallas tried to bury herself in the mind-numbing drudgery of work. She and Nick kept away from each other, while Gideon still maintained his slightly proprietary air towards her. Dallas thought she would crack under the tension.

Then one morning she awoke with a familiar dragging sensation in her lower abdomen and a headache. Depressed and weepy, she told Gideon she had a headache and spent the day alone. She was really waiting for Nick to return to his hut.

As soon as she saw him, his face seemed to confirm her worst imaginings. He stopped a yard from her, and she saw that he had closed himself off from her, waiting for her to tell him why she was there.

"There's something I have to tell you," she said. "I'm not pregnant."

His expression hardened, and he said, "Was there ever really a chance that you would be?"

"Nick!" It was a whisper, but all her pain was contained in it. She turned her head, trying blindly to run away. "You know there was!"

His hand grabbed at her arm, and he pulled her round and saw the tears, the stricken hurt in her eyes.

She thumped her fist against his bare

chest and cried, "I wanted it! You don't know how much I wanted it!"

He hauled her close and he kissed her mouth with a relentless passion until her frenzied assault on him stopped. Her soft, sobbing sigh of submission was lost in his mouth, and when he broke the kiss he whispered, "Forgive me, Dallas."

Later, when Gideon returned from the digging site, he stopped outside her hut and said, "Have you recovered from your headache?"

"It... wasn't just a headache," she said carefully. "I'm not going to have a baby, Gideon."

He went very still and then let out a long, heavy sigh. "That's a relief," he said.

"Not to me, I wanted Nick's baby, Gideon."

"I don't understand you," he said coldly.

"No, you don't. I know it isn't your fault, but you never did."

"You're still infatuated with him, then?"

"It isn't infatuation."

He made an impatient gesture, said he was very tired, and went off to his own hut.

The barrier was still there in the morning, stronger than ever. Gideon didn't return to the dig. He said he was going to talk to the headman, and when she asked if he wanted her to accompany him, he looked at her distantly and said no.

He didn't tell her what was said at the meeting, and his manner was so aloof that she didn't dare to ask. All the rest of that week he seemed bent on retreating further and further from her. He didn't even ask her to do any typing.

She wondered if he had at last accepted that she wasn't going to marry him. Certainly he was no longer acting with the disconcerting possessiveness he had displayed for the last few weeks.

One evening she saw him strolling

along the beach in the dusk, his tall figure looking lonely against the darkening sky, so that she felt a quick thrust of compunction and obeyed an impulse to follow him.

He seemed to welcome her presence, giving her a slight, absent smile; and they walked together for quite some time in silence.

When they finally spoke it was with a sense of sorrow, a sense of loss. Dallas told him she had cared a great deal about him, and that she always would.

He took her hand when they got to her hut. "I care a great deal for you, too, Dallas. Only you, of all the women I've known. I wonder... would you let me come in with you?"

Her heart thudded, and she stared at him, trying to read his eyes. "What... do you mean?" she whispered.

"I mean just what you think," he answered, his voice even, but she felt a faint trembling in the fingers that held hers.

A stab of pain shafted through her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry, Gideon."

He released her hand, and although he still stood close to her, he seemed to be retreating to someplace far away from her. His remoteness was almost frightening. She groped for words of reassurance and comfort, but it wasn't a moment for inane cliches. His voice was dry as dust as he said good night.

Nick changed his plans so he could fly back to Australia with her when the team packed up and finally left the island. Her brother came to Sydney and walked her down the aisle of a small church where she joined Nick and recited to him the words that would join them forever.

Later that night, as they lay together in a hotel bed, his hand idly stroking her thigh, her fingers entwined in his dark hair, he said, "Better than a sleeping mat?"

She laughed. "Softer, but not better. There will never be anything better." ♡





FLOWER OF DESIRE

Young, beautiful and ambitious, Linet Emmonds was on her way to being a major network reporter—until she met Dane Vestry. A self-made business tycoon with mountain manners, he nurtured her real desire—to be loved.

By FRANCINE SHORE

"I'd be happy to drive you to Dane's, but I don't now where that is. I'm just a visitor here," Linet said.

The young, redhead woman whose waving had caused Linet to stop her jeep on the narrow mountain road nodded to the pickup by the roadside.

"It's my water pump," she explained. "I had a feeling it was going bad, but my James isn't well and I wanted him to see Dane. I could give you directions—it's not too far."

She looked down at the small boy

beside her, then to Linet, who smiled. "Good. Climb in. By the way, my name is Linet Emmonds."

"I'm Ruth Shearer." The redhead was already helping James into the jeep. "I live down in Greenwaye with my boy."

"Then you know all about Greenwaye Industries?" Linet said. Ruth nodded, looking surprised. "I'm from Boston. I'm here to do a story on the Greenwaye textile plant."

"So you're the TV reporter people have been talking about. Are you

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shooting film today?"

Linet shook her head. "In fact, I left my camera and sound people back at the Mountainfoot Motel. I wanted to get a feel for the area before I did anything official."

"It's going to rain," Ruth was saying. "You'd better step on it, Linet. Ever been in a sun shower up here?"

Before she could answer, large drops of rain plopped against the windshield. The sun continued to shine, but a thick mist seemed to blow up and around the jeep. It was hard to drive, and Linet slowed down to a crawl. Fortunately, before long Ruth directed her onto another roadway, which led to a clearing and a large mountain cabin.

"Mr. Dane's house," James said shyly, burying his face in Ruth's shoulder. Linet pulled the jeep into a circular driveway, parking it next to a large and shiny Bronco, while Ruth and James ran for the cabin. Whoever Dane was, he did pretty well for himself to afford the latest-model Bronco, she thought.

She turned quickly, surprised that she hadn't heard sound or footfall of the man who stood behind her. He was tall, dressed as she might have guessed a modern mountain man would dress, in half-open cotton shirt and long-legged, close-fitting jeans. Coal-black hair that was long enough for the wind to tease edged a lean, strong-featured face. The tan of that face contrasted sharply with its wide-set gray eyes, watching her with an open, speculative admiration that had the impact of an electric shock.

"You look like a mountain daisy standing there in the rain." Pleasure and a trace of admiration colored a deep voice with just a trace of the soft Western Virginian drawl.

"You must be Dane." It was hard to speak coolly in the face of his warm, teas-

ing smile.

"Guilty as charged. Were you looking for me?" A gust of moist wind brought even heavier rain, and he began to walk toward her, long, muscled legs moving with a pantherlike grace.

"Ruth Shearer is looking for you. I brought her and her little boy—"

Before she could say more Ruth herself poked her head out of the cabin door. "*Dane*. Are you two going to stand out there in the rain all day?" she shouted.

"Ruth's right. Come on." The tall, tanned man reached out, encircling Linet's waist, drawing her close as he began to walk toward the cabin. There was something easy and proprietary in that gesture, and she frowned. Was he making a pass or was this just the friendly hospitality of the hills she had read so much about? She glanced up at him, saw that his gray eyes were smiling down at her, and felt a sudden, unlooked-for confusion. Certainly she hadn't expected a mountain man to be like this.

"Watch the stairs." He stepped aside to let her enter the cabin first. Only, she decided, it wasn't a cabin. It was, rather, a modern house cleverly designed to look like a rustic mountain dwelling. There was nothing rustic—or simple—about the beautifully detailed wood on the porch, the texture of the paneling inside. Even the furniture was expensive.

"Is it the eye again, James?" Dane's voice had changed to one of concern, and Linet switched her attention back to the owner of the house.

As James nodded, Dane glanced up at the redhead. "Ruth, he's got to go to the doctor. You know what that probably means."

"I've already told him that. He won't budge without your say-so, Dane Vestry."

"It'll be all right, Ruth. I promise."

The deep voice was gentle, then bracing. "How about staying on to dinner? It's getting late and James should be hungry by now."

Ruth shook her head. "I'd appreciate a ride into Greenwaye, though."

"I'd be happy to drive you," Linet offered. "I'm not in any hurry, and I enjoy the mountain scenery."

Dane frowned. "Ruth's house is miles out of your way. The mountain road that leads to it is poorly lit, and you might get lost on your way back." He paused, adding, "Why not drive with me while I deliver Ruth and James home? That way you won't miss out on the mountain scenery."

"Well?" His smile held a glint of amusement, and she nodded. "Good. We'll take the long, scenic route just for you."

Linet turned to Ruth and saw that the redhead was watching her with a slight frown. It made her wonder, suddenly, about the relationship between Dane Vestry and Ruth. Perhaps Ruth resented Dane's asking her to drive with them. Awkward—but there was no graceful way to get out of it now.

To ease the tension she was beginning to feel, she asked, "Have you lived here long, Dane?"

"Long enough," was the easy reply. "I was born here. Worked in the mines before they closed down. I went away for a time, but this is my home."

"You say 'mines.' You mean the coal mines, don't you? Greenwaye was a mining town not too long ago, wasn't it?" He nodded, and she added, "Greenwaye Industries changed all that, didn't it?"

"What do you know about Greenwaye Industries?" There was surprise in his voice.

"I don't know as much as I'd like to," Linet confessed. "I hope to learn more.

It's not every day that a brand-new textile firm can spring up in a depressed area and make a whole community thrive."

Ruth, who had been silent during the trip, now said, "Linet's the TV reporter who's here to do the story on us, Dane."

"I knew I'd heard the name."

"You're new on the network, aren't you? If I'd seen you on the show, I'd have remembered your face. Any man would."

Dane seemed to be about to say more but instead guided the Bronco to a halt beside a neat, whitewashed home. He helped Ruth out of the car, then waited as the women said good-bye. He was silent, but his strong, dark face seemed thoughtful.

"So you're the reporter from *Hour by Hour*. Why is the only nationwide news show out of Boston so interested in Greenwaye Industries, Linet?"

She said, eagerly, "Economic recovery these days is big news. We hope to show how when the coal mines closed, Greenwaye Industries turned life around for the people in this area. By the way, I was told the coal mines closed because of a cave-in some years back. Is that right?"

"You've done your homework." He was smiling, but there was an angry light in his eyes. "The owners of the mines weren't overzealous about applying safety procedures."

As he spoke the Bronco jolted suddenly, sending Linet sliding against him. Instinctively his arm went around her, both steadyng her and pressing her against him. For one long instant her high, firm breasts were pressed against the lean hard-

ness of him. Then, flustered, she pulled away.

"That's a not-so-subtle reminder for me to keep my mind on my driving," Dane said ruefully. "Let me make amends for that bad bump by offering you mountain hospitality. We're nearly at my cabin, and it's still early. Share bread and salt with me or, rather, steak and salad and fresh bread."

"You're asking me to have dinner with you?"

"Surely that's done in Boston, too?"

"Of course, but . . ." Linet suddenly caught her breath. They were cresting a hill and she could see the huge, pale gold full moon rising above tatters of mist. "How beautiful," she whispered.

"There's an even better view from the cabin," Dane drawled softly. "Besides, we can talk some more about Greenwaye Industries and why you became a reporter. Why did you, Linet?"

She smiled reminiscently. "I hadn't thought of the media at all until college. That was when I got lucky, I guess. I had an absolutely fabulous professor at Radcliffe, and she turned me on to reporting."

"So you went to Radcliffe?" Linet glanced at him, sensing rather than hearing the change in his voice. She decided she must have imagined it, however, for his next words were as pleasant as ever. "Here we are at the cabin. Are you going to condemn my steaks and salad and me to a lonely meal, or will you stay and share with us?"

"I'll share if you'll let me help."

Easily, he slid sizzling steaks onto earthenware plates that matched the salad bowl. "And where do you live, Linet? The Cambridge area? One of the suburbs?"

"Beacon Hill," she said, and saw him look at her in surprise. "I'm house-sitting for a friend of a friend."

"Beacon Hill is a grand address for a

young television reporter," was his response. Again she thought she caught a strangeness in his voice.

"You're a fine cook," she said, trying to recapture the early mood between them.

"I do many things well."

"And what do you do in Greenwaye?"

He lifted his shoulders, let them fall. "As you can see, I'm a plain mountain man."

"With a taste for fine steaks, expensive furniture, and new wheels?" She shook her head. "If I had to guess, I'd say you fit into Greenwaye Industries somehow."

He tore a hunk of bread from the loaf. "You seem very dedicated to getting your story for *Hour by Hour*. You're new on the network, aren't you? If I'd seen you on the show, I'd have remembered your face. Any man would."

She felt oddly pleased at the compliment. "Pete Surran—our executive producer—hired me after he'd seen me working at a local TV news show. That was only about six months ago."

"And you, no doubt, impressed him with your talents?" In the glow of the lamp his face was deep copper, his eyes almost silver. "Well, I'm sure you have all the qualifications for making it to the top. Looks. Connections. The right background."

There was just enough mockery in his voice to make her stiffen. "I work very hard for my pay, Dane."

"How hard it must be to have gone to the top schools and have lived at the right addresses all your life. And you must have had monied parents, of course. Boston Brahmins always do."

She threw up her head in indignant protest. "Where did you get the idea that I'm a Boston Brahmin?"

He shrugged, then smiled. "Don't be so touchy, Linet. You shouldn't assume that we're all naive hillbillies out here."

He got up and strolled over to the dining-room window. "Come over here," he said.

She frowned. "Why?" she asked cautiously, then felt flustered as he laughed.

"Are you afraid of coming to stand at a window with me?" As she rose, uncertainly, he added, "I just want you to hear the mountains singing."

She ran a hand through her thick, soft curls, wondering if her hot cheeks were flushed under his silver gaze. Slowly, she moved across the room to stand beside him. "I don't hear anything," she murmured.

"Listen," he commanded. She felt his hands on her shoulders—warm, strong hands—and she knew that if she moved she could be in his arms. She felt giddy suddenly, as if she had drunk too much wine. "Listen," he whispered again.

She felt a soft touch on her neck—his warm breath. She must break the spell and break it quickly, or the magic of the mountain might sweep her away.

"Damn it, Dane, I'm not going to have dinner with you," Linet cried. Then she stopped, eyes narrowing. "If I do go out with you..."

Drawing a deep breath, she moved a little away from him. "It's beautiful, but I have to be going back. My crew will be wondering what's happened to me."

"A dedicated reporter." His tone was unreadable.

She nodded slowly. "It'll be a great story. I know it. If only..." She hesitated.

"If only what?"

"Well, there has been some speculation that Mr. Martime isn't the moving force behind the company. Having talked with him, I tend to agree. When I was driving up the mountain today I was thinking what I'd give to discover the man who's really behind Greenwaye Industries."

"I see." There was no question about it now; there was a change in his voice. "And then you just happened to meet Ruth and James? How very fortunate for you."

"I don't understand..." Her words fell to dust as he faced her, eyes cold as silver ice.

"I wondered at the coincidence. A beautiful woman who just happens to be a TV reporter coming to the rescue of my friends. For a fledgling in the media business, you've shown initiative, Linet Emmonds. I regret to say that it won't help you further with the story. But perhaps there are other things I can do for you."

Before she could question his change in mood, his arms were around her. There was no tenderness or warmth in this embrace, and his arms were strong and angry. "Are you insane?" she demanded. "I'm demonstrating that though I can't help you with your story on Greenwaye, I can be of use in other ways. You could, for instance, tell your friends at the yacht club how you shared a Mountain Man's bed."

His lips came down on hers, hard, demanding, somehow insulting. She could hardly breathe because of his strength and her own indignation. She pushed at him as hard as she could, and after a second he let her go.

They faced each other for a long moment, then she pulled herself together. "I'm going back to the motel."

He seemed to draw himself together, to affect a semblance of his easy manner.

"Are you sure you can find your way back? I wouldn't want you to get lost on the mountain." Something flickered deep in his gray eyes and she was reminded, for a moment, of a great, angry mountain cat. "I want you to be in top form tomorrow for your day at Greenwaye Industries. I hope it exceeds your expectations, Linet Emmonds."

The next morning, when they arrived at the textiles plant, Sydney Harrison was there to greet them. The plant manager's chunky, good-natured face was today swathed in an apologetic grin. With a sense of foreboding Linet listened to his excuses. He was very sorry, he said, but shooting wouldn't be possible today.

"Mr. Harrison, I promise we won't take up your time or any of your people's time. We won't be underfoot. We just want to take a few shots of work in progress, some footage of the inside and outside of the plant." Cagily she added, "Of course we'd like to interview *you*, too."

"Mr. Martime just telephoned me. We aren't to do anything to interrupt our regular work schedule. That means no TV cameras and no interviews."

Linet nodded. It was only eight-thirty, and already she felt tense as a taut guitar string. This would be, she decided grimly, one of the hardest stories she'd tackled in her years as a TV reporter.

Nobody, it seemed, had a moment to speak to her or the crew. It wasn't until they were finished at the plant that Linet gave vent to her frustration. "I have never met a more tight-mouthed bunch," she groaned.

"Maybe they just distrust outsiders," a crewman said gloomily. Linet shook her head. A suspicion that had been growing in her mind was by now a firm conviction.

"They were told not to cooperate with us—with me," she said flatly. Her crew

looked at her, not comprehending. "Never mind—it's a long story."

They spent the rest of the day in Greenwaye, talking to townpeople, shooting picturesque footage. By the time they were through, Linet was as exhausted as her crew. They were all for having an early dinner, but she declined, opting for a shower and a sandwich later. She needed time to think. If, as she thought, Dane Vestry was behind the refusal of Greenwaye Industries to cooperate, she needed to change his mind.

She was drying herself when the doorbell rang. That must be the film, she thought, opened the door—and there he stood!

She started to shut the door, but he had somehow wedged himself into the doorway. "Wh-what are you doing here?" she managed.

"I'm delivering these." Gallantly bowing, he placed a bouquet of flowers in her arms. Her mind registered the fact that these were not garden flowers but wild-flowers, fragrant and freshly picked. "Do you always answer your door draped in a towel?" he went on as his eyes roved lightly over her, caressing the rounded breasts above the towel, then dropping down to take in the barely covered hips and slender, long legs rosy from the warmth of the shower.

"Of course not," she spluttered. "I was taking a shower. I thought you were my film person—"

"Ah. You answer the door in your towel when your film person calls?"

"No, of course not," she said shortly. "But, speaking of my crew, Dane Vestry, I need to talk to you—"

"Anything, over dinner," he told her. "I came by to ask you if you'll have dinner with me and tell me about your day."

The memory of her day at the Greenwaye plant made Linet almost forget her

embarrassment. "As a matter of fact, that's exactly what I'd like to talk to you about," she said. "Did you tell Sydney Harrison not to talk to us?"

"I'll pick you up at six o'clock," he replied as if she hadn't spoken.

"Damn it, Dane. I'm not going to have dinner with you," Linet cried. Then she stopped, eyes narrowing. "If I do go out with you, you'll answer my questions about Greenwaye Industries?"

He nodded, still smiling, but with a strange glint in his gray eyes.

"I'll be ready at six," she said shortly.

Suddenly he bent closer. Reaching out, he wound a fair tendril of damp hair around his fingers. "Do you know what you look like?" he said softly. "You look like a gold-and-white mountain flower that's not quite sure whether to be plucked or not. Give in, Linet. Being plucked can be a lot of fun—"

"Approaching me through Ruth and James was a shoddy trick, Linet. I don't appreciate people using me or people I care for."

It wasn't till she started to dress that Linet realized she didn't know where Dane was taking her for dinner, or what clothing would be appropriate. Fortunately she'd brought a silk skirt and matching blouse with her that was suitable for any occasion. She had just brushed her hair and dabbed on a little lipstick when she heard the knock on the door. On her way to answer it an impulse made her snip one of the wildflowers Dane had brought and slip it into her hair. All right, she thought, Mr. Dane Vestry, mountain man, I'm ready for you.

"You're not wearing your towel," Dane said as she opened the door. "I was looking forward to it."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," she said lightly. His gray eyes roved over her face, took in the revealing top and the creamy neck and bosom, the fall of silk. Then they came back to the wildflower in her shining hair.

"Oh, you don't disappoint me. Shall we go? It will take us some time to reach Foxx."

During the journey Dane gave Linet a running commentary on the land through which they were traveling.

"You should have been a history teacher," she exclaimed after a particularly interesting anecdote about the region. "Tell me, you said you'd gone away from the mountains for a while. Did you go to school?" He nodded. "Where?"

He hesitated a moment, then said, "I had an athletic scholarship at Harvard."

Before she could comment, he eased the Jaguar to a stop beside a hospitable-looking front door, and a young man in a white dinner jacket hurried out.

"Good evening, Mr. Vestry. Ma'am. Shall I park the Jag?"

"Thanks, Jack."

"Your usual table is waiting for you, Mr. Vestry. Please come this way."

Dinner was delicious. Linet hadn't believed it was possible to get such excellent seafood in these mountains, but at the Foxx apparently no expense was spared. She looked across the table at Dane, who was cutting into a rib of beef with gusto. I'll ask him my questions now, she thought, and at that moment he looked up and smiled at her.

"You have a look in your eye that means business. Did you enjoy your meal, Linet?"

"Do you need to ask?" Ruefully she nodded to her empty plate.

"I'm delighted. Now you can tell your friends that we don't eat fried squirrel or 'possum too often."

"How awful—but, Dane, you're right about business. Earlier we talked about my visit to the plant this morning, how it was a flop." He watched her, continuing to eat calmly, and she suddenly felt unsure. "Dane, this story is an important one for me," she began again. "It's the first big feature Pete Surran has let me handle since he hired me. When he told me I could have the story, I was ecstatic."

Dane showed no reaction.

"TV is a competitive industry," she began again. "I need to do well on this special."

"Is there a reason why you shouldn't do well? As I said last night, you seem to have all the right qualifications for a good journalist," he retorted lightly.

"Well, I've run into a blank wall here, and I wondered if you could help me. You see, I need to know who the backer of Greenwaye Industries is. I have a feeling that he told his people not to talk to the media today." She held her breath for a heartbeat, then asked, "Is your money behind Greenwaye Industries, Dane?"

"Of course it is." His amusement held subtle mockery, and the look in his eyes was suddenly hard. "But you didn't just figure it out, did you? You knew before you 'rescued' Ruth and James in the hills yesterday."

She stared at him in total surprise. "How could I? I didn't even know you existed."

He gave a short, hard bark of laughter, and the look in his eyes became wintry, until the gray glittered like ice. "Perhaps you didn't know I was here until Ruth mentioned me, but the name Vestry would have meant something to you if you were a journalist worth your salt. Are you worth your salt, Linet Emmonds?"

Without warning, his hand shot out, grasping hers by the wrist and holding it so tightly that she gasped in sudden pain. "Do you know where I got this grip?" he asked her, his voice soft and silkily dangerous. "In the coal mines, my darling. I wasn't raised in a Boston Brahmin's ivory tower. My parents died early and when I was just a kid, my grandparents took me in. Coal-mining folk, both of them—and I was going to be a miner, too. In fact my first summer job was with Grandpa down in the mine."

"The one that...that collapsed?" she asked.

"The same, only it didn't collapse for years after that," he said. "You see, my grandparents wanted me to make something of myself. I knew how to run and I knew how to catch a football. Faraway Harvard gave the miner's grandson an athletic scholarship. Later I went to Harvard Law School."

Linet shook her head, doggedly clinging to the fact that at the end of Dane Vestry's story lay the facts she needed.

"Why law?" she asked, keeping her voice crisp.

"The law always fascinated me. But it wasn't easy, Linet, especially in my undergrad days. I was either on the playing field or studying. I wanted to send money home, so I got a few odd jobs. Sometimes I'd fall asleep over my books, stumble to class, and then to practice and to work hardly knowing my own name." His lips curled. "I hope I'm not boring you with this story of my hard college years."

She shook her head, frowning, remembering. Hard? she thought, and nearly laughed, remembering how she'd scrubbed tables in the cafeteria, typed other people's term papers, cleaned up after messy labs for a few dollars an hour. Everything Dane had said could have described her

days at Radcliffe—except that *she* didn't have any athletic scholarship. "You're not the only one who's had a hard time," she snapped.

"Spare me the tale of your hard days on Beacon Hill. Anyway, that's neither here nor there. The fact of the matter is that, clever reporter though you might be, you've chosen the wrong way of getting to me. Approaching me through Ruth and James was a shoddy trick, I don't appreciate people using me or people I care for."

"Does that mean you're not going to tell me anything about Greenwaye Industries or let any of your employees talk to me? Simply because you feel I've 'used' your friends to get to you?"

"Correct," he drawled. Then he leaned closer. "Now that business is out of the way, maybe we can progress to more pleasurable topics."

Doggedly she went on. "Isn't that like cutting off your nose to spite your face? A new company, however successful, needs publicity. *Hour by Hour* can give you that. If you don't want me to cover it, Pete will assign another reporter. I'm leaving with the crew tomorrow at ten, from Staunton. I could call Pete tonight, and a replacement could fly in—"

"You show commendable loyalty to your boss. Is he a good friend?" he murmured. Lifting her hand, he smoothed it between his long, tanned fingers. "Are you or aren't you available, Linet Emmonds?"

She snatched her hand away. "You were talking about loyalty. Your plant employees are devoted to you. Can you tell me why?"

A gleam of respect for her tenacity shaded his eyes for a moment. "That's what makes Greenwaye Industries different from other businesses. One of the good friends I made at Harvard was a Japanese businessman's son. He taught

me enough of the Japanese idea of industry to want to try some modified concepts here. Bosses aren't just fat-cat figureheads in Japan. They care about their workers, genuinely look out for them."

"Paternalism?" she inquired, and he nodded briefly.

"If you like, but it works both ways. Workers have job security and profit sharing while management has loyalty and willing workers." He stabbed a finger toward her. "And that is all I am going to tell you."

"Won't you at least consider what I said about the publicity you could get from *Hour by Hour*?" Linet pleaded.

"Your ears are like pretty shells," he murmured. "They must be purely ornamental." His voice rose a little, chilled, and his eyes were colder still. "Even if you stay around for a year, you will get no more cooperation from me or my workers."

An aura of menace seemed to emanate from him, and Linet bit her lip.

"I don't ever want to be friends with you, Dane Vestry. After you humiliated me."

"How? By exposing the game you were playing, Linet?"

"You knew I was going to ask you about this—and you knew you were going to refuse to tell me," she said indignantly. "Why didn't you tell me yesterday?"

"And spoil an entertaining evening? Greenwaye girls lack your, ah, polish. And the evening's just begun."

He smiled as he spoke, and his bold gaze caressed her, coursing over her high breasts, the rounded line of her thighs.

"We could get to some more pleasurable form of... business," he said softly.

Cheeks burning, hot blood singing through her in anger and dismay at her own reaction to his marauding gaze, Linet got up from the table.

"I don't think I care for any more of your kind of business," she said shortly. "I'd like to leave now, Mr. Vestry."

"As you wish." He paid the check, then got to his feet with a courtly grace that barely masked the pantherlike fluidity of his big body.

They stood outside the restaurant while they waited for the car to be brought. She drew in a deep breath of night air, scented with heavy honeysuckle. How could everything have become so complicated? she asked herself. How could he have misread her every move and motive? Her hands were clenched at her sides as the car approached.

"It's a beautiful night for a long drive," he said, drawling a bit more than usual. She did not acknowledge his words. "If you stand out here long enough, the mosquitos will get you," he went on. "Or are you thinking of telling me to go to hell? It's a long walk back to Greenwaye, Linet. You won't make it."

Saying nothing, she got into the Jaguar.

As he swung the car into the darkness he smiled at her.

"Don't sulk, Linet. Take defeat like a good reporter. No doubt your Pete Surran will give you a better story in due time. I have no doubt that your charm and devotion will persuade him."

She did not answer him. Instead, however, she became all the more conscious of Dane beside her, and then of the fact that instead of making the turn to the interstate and Greenwaye, he was taking another route. Linet opened her eyes and blinked.

"Where are we going?" she demanded. "What are you doing?"

"Stopping to admire the night," he said quietly. "You're angry, and I don't want a beautiful woman to go away mad from my mountains." He killed the motor and leaned across to take her hand in his. "Come on, Linet, admit that you've lost out this time. Forget the story and make friends."

"Just like that," she said. "No apology for making me lose my story—nothing." Bitterness made her want to rage at him, but instead her eyes were filling with tears. She blinked them away, even more angry with herself. "I don't ever want to be friends with you, Dane Vestry. After you humiliated me..."

"How? By exposing the game you were playing, Linet?" he said, and in spite of herself her heart fumbled at the sweetness of her name on his lips. "Darling Linet, neither of us is a child. I've lived in your world, and I know how the games are played. In your business you use people before they use you. Isn't that true?"

"You're wrong," she began to say, but before she could he had slipped a hand under her chin, was turning her face gently toward him. She wanted to pull away, but could not, for warm, insistent lips were claiming hers. Still gently, teasing, she felt his teeth nip her lower lip before his tongue began to seek out the intimate warmth of her mouth.

"This is much better than business," he muttered. "Come over here to me, darling."

A drugged, heavy feeling permeated the very marrow of her bones. He kissed her again, and then his dark head lowered to kiss the swell of her breasts in the V of her blouse. Lazily, sensuously, his warm mouth covered her breast above the silken material of the blouse, unerringly finding the now taut, tender tip.

"Dane, please.. Don't start. We can't—"

"But we can."

She opened her eyes to drink in the look on his bronzed face, the gray eyes that were full of desire for her. "Dane," she breathed, and wrapped her arms around him, moving her fingers in his crisp, dark hair. And as she did so she heard his murmured words.

"This is better than business, isn't it?"

The words penetrated the layers of passion that had enveloped her body.

"No," she gasped. She wanted to shout the word, but it came out in a funny little hiccup. Dane paid no attention, and she grabbed handfuls of his hair, pulled as hard as she could. "I mean it, Dane Vestry. Stop it right now. I won't be used by you."

That could only be Ruth Shearer. Linet's stomach tightened involuntarily. So Ruth had come to Boston with Dane.

"What are you talking about, Linet? What has 'use' got to do with this? You want me as much as I want you."

"I won't do it," she said. "I don't want to do anything but go back to the motel. You take me there, Dane Vestry, or I will walk..."

She saw the sudden narrowing of his eyes, "I forget," he said, "that back in 'civilized' circles sex is a negotiable commodity. Did you think I was using it to humiliate you, Linet? Or were you trying the old tease routine on me?"

"Damn you, Dane." She bit her lip hard, knowing that what had happened, what she'd felt, was no game. "Let's just

say that neither of us got what we wanted," she said bitterly.

"That often happens in business dealings," she heard him say softly. "Don't bother your pretty head about it, Linet. I don't doubt but that there'll be other opportunities for you to, ah, get what you want."

"It's not enough, Linet."

"But, Pete, surely with the footage we took and the fact that Dane Vestry is behind Greenway Industries...."

Pete Surran ran a tanned, well-manicured hand through graying hair. "It's not enough for a special on *Hour by Hour*," he said. "It's too bad, Linet. You had a golden opportunity to get a real story about Dane Vestry and you blew it. You know that, don't you?"

"I did my best," she said tightly. "Dane Vestry didn't want me to get any kind of story."

To her surprise, Pete shrugged. "That's nothing new. Vestry's always been like that: He guards his privacy to the point of violence. That's why it would have been a real coup if you'd been able to get him to open up to you." His shrewd blue eyes met hers. "You do know how important he is in the business world?"

"I do now," she confessed. "Back then I didn't know of his reputation or that as a corporate lawyer he used to wield so much power."

Pete nodded. "He was probably in the news while you were still in school. Anyway, only a few people in the higher business echelons knew the scope of the man's brains and skill. Until just a few years ago he was the corporate lawyer, Lin. He could command whatever price he wanted, and he always got what he asked. His clients were never dissatisfied."

Linet remembered what Dane had said about games people played in "her"

world. "And yet he's a private person?" she questioned. "Isn't that a contradiction?"

"He preferred to work behind the scenes, stay out of the press and the limelight. Now you say he's the man behind Greenwaye Industries."

"And yet you're going to kill my story."

Seeing her disappointment, he smiled. "It happens, Lin. Don't be too hard on yourself. I think I'll put Jake Reuben on the story. He's an old war-horse and knows all the ropes."

She nodded, her cheeks warm as she walked out of Pete's plush office. And, though Pete didn't know it, he was doing her a favor. How could she have gone back to Greenwaye on assignment?

Bone tired, Linet wearily bought some groceries and returned home. But "home" was perhaps not the word for the spacious apartment on Beacon Hill. Linet had always felt out of place there. Everything looked well matched and perfect and fiercely uncomfortable.

"Well, I can't look a gift apartment in the mouth," she said as the phone rang.

"Linet?" Pete Surran's voice was short and clipped—a sure sign of intense excitement. "News, Linet. Vestry's in town."

She nearly dropped the telephone receiver. "You mean here in Boston?" she gasped. "Why?"

"You're going to find out," Pete told her. "He's staying at the Sheraton, Room five-ten."

Panic drummed through Linet and her hand tightened around the receiver till her knuckles showed white. "I thought you were going to put Jake Reuben on the story."

"Jake's covering a story in California. Besides, now that I've thought it over, you're perfect for the job. You've already established contact with Dane and he's

partial to pretty women, if I recall. He's the love-'em-and-leave-'em kind, but that shouldn't be a problem from a reporter's point of view."

A reporter. Yes, that was what she was. She forced her tone to be cool as she asked, "Is he here because of Greenwaye Industries, do you think?"

"It's not Greenwaye Industries I'm interested in," Pete said, surprising her. "It's the man behind the scenes. Nobody has gotten close to Vestry, learned what makes him think the way he does. I want a personal, in-depth analysis of the man himself that will knock the pants off our competition."

Her cool shattered as she cried, "Pete, I can't do that."

"Of course you can." His voice was kindly and genial, but edged with steel. "You're pretty enough and you're smart enough and he already knows you. If he's here on business, offer him plenty of publicity. Follow him around, learn about him, and write it."

"You say he's a private man," she reasoned desperately. "He'll never let me get close to him."

"It's your job to persuade him." There was more steel in Pete's voice. "Linet, I've been criticized by my staff for taking you on when you were a raw unknown. Now, here's your chance. Show everyone what you can do."

"I won't call him till tomorrow," she whispered to herself, feeling suddenly naked and vulnerable in the big, overdecorated apartment. "And when I do call him, I'll be strictly business. I'll tell him what I want, and if he tells me no, I'll go back and report to Pete. Let him put someone else on the story. I don't want it."

During assignments that morning she tried the hotel twice, but each time was told that Dane was still out. She did not

call the hotel at all in the afternoon, and when she returned to the studio early that evening, a message was on her desk that a woman had been trying to reach her. The message said, "Woman—cute Southern drawl—wants you to call her at this number. Name is Ruth."

Ruth. That could only be Ruth Shearer. Linet's stomach tightened involuntarily. So Ruth had come to Boston with Dane. Well, so much the better. Ruth would know how she could get to Dane, and with the redhead around nothing but business would be discussed. Quickly she dialed the number Ruth had left.

To her surprise, however, a woman answered almost immediately. "Mass. Eye and Ear," she said. "Can I help you?"

The hospital. What was Ruth doing in the Mass. Eye and Ear? Then she remembered James's eye. She asked for the room number Ruth had given, and a short while later Ruth's softly slurred voice came over the wire.

"Linet, I'm glad I got through to you! I didn't know how to reach you except through your station. I wouldn't have bothered you, but Dane's in an important meeting and I don't know anyone else in the city . . ." she paused and then added, "It's James."

Linet was more and more puzzled. "Is there some problem?" She asked. "Can I help somehow?"

Ruth sighed. "James is up here for that eye operation; and he's real scared and down. I don't know the city at all, so I can't go hunting around for a shop where they sell toys and games. The hospital gift show doesn't have what he wants, and . . . well, I was wondering if you'd know a store near the Eye and Ear."

Linet felt absurdly pleased, suddenly lighthearted. "I'll find something to cheer him up! If the traffic doesn't get me, I'll

be there in under thirty minutes."

Soon Linet was riding up in the hospital elevator and attracting several amused glances, but it was well worth it when she saw James's thin face light up as she came into the room. The hippopotamus was squeezed tightly, and Ruth tied the balloons to the side of his bed.

"Your boss says you're to stay with me wherever I go and do exactly as I say—his words, not mine."

"It was good of you," she told Linet feelingly. "I hated bothering you, but I didn't know anyone else in Boston. It's a funny feeling, kind of lonely. In Greenway everyone depends on everyone else."

Ruth looked tired and, in spite of a jaunty smile, worried. Impulsively Linet put her arms around her and gave her a hard hug. Ruth seemed surprised, but squeezed back, then smiled more warmly as Linet told her how good the hospital was.

"I know it. That's why I let Dane talk us into coming up here with him," she said. "It's only a cataract, but James is so little. His daddy used to have bad eye trouble, but we couldn't afford to get it fixed." She gave Linet a swift glance. "I guess that sounds strange to you."

Linet shook her head. "I don't know what Dane told you, but I wasn't raised in luxury. Dad was a pipe fitter and Mother a nurse. After they died, I had to work throughout my four years at college."

"No fooling?" Ruth's astonishment was genuine, but before she could say more a loud, popping sound came from the bed. James began to laugh.

"Mom, Linet, the balloons are popping," he exclaimed.

"Pop another one." The boy in James's room urged. Some children from nearby rooms were looking on and also urging him. James's cheeks were flushed with excitement, and he looked at Linet.

"Whatever you like, honey," Linet said. "They're all yours." She pretended to cover her ears as James delightedly popped a balloon, and then another. Eager children's voices rose excitedly, and Ruth leaned closer to Linet.

"This is just what James needed... some fun, and a few friends here in the hospital," she said. "I'm glad I didn't disturb Dane at his meeting, and glad I called you."

"I'm glad too—" Linet began, when above the hubbub of children's voices and popping balloons a deep voice rose, an implacable, outraged voice.

"What's going on here?" the voice demanded.

She swung around, her wide, dark eyes taking in a blurred image of a tall, long-legged man in a dark business suit. His eyes were cold as steel.

"What's going on here?" Dane repeated. Then, switching his gaze to Linet, he continued, "And what are *you* doing here?"

"Linet brought me balloons, Mr. Dane." James's eager voice broke the charged silence.

Dane's face softened. "You're supposed to lie quiet and not get excited," he reminded James. His eyes were cool as he turned to Linet. "He's not here for fun and games. He's here for an operation," he said tightly.

"Dane, don't blame Linet. James was restless and lonely and I didn't want to disturb your important meeting. I remembered that Linet worked here in Boston, so I called the studio and she

came right over." She nodded to the now happily talking James. "He just needed a few good laughs and some friends."

"I wish you'd telephoned me."

"I'll be on my way, Ruth," Linet said softly. "I'm glad James feels happier." Then, without waiting for a reply, she gathered her purse against her and walked out of the room. She was halfway down the long, carpeted corridor when she heard her name called.

"Linet, wait a moment. I'm sorry. This time I was wrong."

"You were wrong before, too," she said tartly.

"I've got something to discuss with you," he told her.

"I'm expected back at the studio. Sorry," she said. She started to walk again, and he fell into step beside her.

"Don't tell me you're too busy to talk business. You never were before. During our last encounters you seemed to want to discuss your story at all costs."

His gray eyes roved over her lightly, and her body reacted treacherously to the memory of sensitive, caressing hands. "Suppose I tell you I've decided to give *Hour by Hour* an exclusive on Greenwaye Industries?"

"You what?"

Staring at him, she saw the flicker of sardonic humor flash in his eyes before he nodded. "You've convinced me that I need national publicity for Greenwaye Industries. I propose a two-part special for *Hour-by Hour*: first, the story of Greenwaye Industries in West Virginia; second, the story of a subsidiary company I want to form here in the Boston area." He paused. "That is, if you want to talk about it."

He was playing some game, she thought. What?

"Well, Linet?" The drawl was pronounced in his deep voice. "I thought

you'd jump at the chance of finally getting my story. When I phoned Pete Surran he seemed enthusiastic enough."

"You called Pete?" She could imagine Pete's reaction at having this choice plum of a story falling into his lap. He nodded.

"Your boss informs me that you're relieved of all your other assignments. You're to stay with me wherever I go and do exactly as I say—his words, not mine." He paused, adding lightly, "Ruth just told me she wants me out of her way for a few hours. How does dinner sound to you, Linet?"

"Since you mentioned a two-part special, I take it you and Pete discussed how soon the first segment would be aired?"

He nodded. "Yes. Your boss and I agreed that the footage you shot up in the mountains plus an interview with me should be fired in this week's segment."

"That doesn't give me much time." She frowned, thinking hard.

"You'll need to go over the interview with me tonight if you plan to do the interview tomorrow." He was watching her closely. "Name a good restaurant, Linet. Business is usually more palatable over food."

"I had a condition, too, remember? If you don't stick to your side of the bargain, I'm walking out now."

What Boston restaurant would be grand enough for Dane Vestry? she wondered. And then she thought of Mac's. Suddenly she wanted to see Dane Vestry on her own turf, his money and power set aside.

"There is a restaurant that a lot of us from the studio go to," she began tentatively. "It's nothing fancy, but it's got the coldest beer and the best sandwiches in town."

"I have my studio car with me. You could follow me to Mac's if you have your own car—"

"I have an aversion to company cars." He slid a hand under her elbow, walking toward the public parking garage near the hospital. "You'll ride with me, and after dinner I'll drive you back here to collect your machine. I want to spend an hour or so with James before visiting hours end. Fair enough?"

It was a statement, not a request, and Linet did not feel like arguing. "As you wish," she said, then raised her eyebrows as he steered her toward a white Mercedes-Benz. "Do you garage this one in Boston?" she murmured, remembering the Jaguar.

He shrugged as if the matter were unimportant.

Grimly Linet made herself concentrate on the feature story. She asked Dane about the beginning of Greenway Industries, and as he talked the other, the professional side of her took over.

"But why come so far east to start a subsidiary company?" she asked. "Isn't that taking a risk?"

"Not really. This area was one of the primary centers of the cloth and garment industry. I have many business contacts here." He paused, and his voice altered as he continued. "Sometimes, also, you need to take risks if you value your goals."

She asked several more questions before they arrived at Mac's and found a place to park.

"Looks like a popular place," Dane said. She glanced at him, saw that he was watching her in an amused way.

She smiled ruefully. Foolish to try to discomfit him, she thought. Dane Vestry wasn't the type to be uncomfortable anywhere.

They both ordered beer and the special—oyster stew with sourdough bread—and again Linet picked up the thread of questioning. He answered all she asked, gave input of his own. By the time their oyster stew arrived, Linet had the working outline of an excellent interview.

"I'll go over the questions with you tomorrow before we do the interview," she told Dane. "And I'll check with my sound man and crew tonight, make sure of the time when we can shoot the interview, arrange a place—"

"Why not at my suite at the Sheraton?" Dane asked. "After the interview I'm hosting a lunch at Jimmy's. Some very important people will be there, and you might want to get some of it on tape." She nodded, deep in thought, then looked up and saw him smiling. "Now you are as I remember you," he said. "Young, earnest, wrapped up in your job, and very lovely. There'll be many things for us to enjoy together."

She had been relaxing into the familiar patterns of her work. Now his words brought warning signals. "I don't think so," she said guardedly.

"Why not?"

"Dane, I can't do this story right unless it's strictly business between us this time." Her heart was leaping, tumbling like a fish in a net, but she knew she had to speak openly. It was going to be hard to remain on neutral ground and stay cool and businesslike with this man.

"If I accept your condition, you'll have to accept one of mine," he said. Still holding her hand, he added, "You know, Linet, I didn't seek you out for this feature on Greenwaye because you were lovely and because I enjoy your company.

I looked into your credentials."

She pulled her hand away. "I trust they were satisfactory?" she asked wryly.

"If they weren't, I wouldn't be here. You're a young reporter without any claim to fame yet. But if you do well on this feature, you'll be able to write your own ticket. Think of it. You'll be closer to me than any person has been in my career. You'll stay with me during business meetings, meet and listen to people I do business with. A lot of things you hear will be in confidence." He paused, his eyes suddenly hard, suddenly piercing. "That means that I will have to trust you."

She frowned. "I don't know what you mean."

"I want your promise that you will air nothing until I go over it with you—and also that there will be no mention of my personal life or my friends' personal lives without their permission."

She could hear Pete's voice in her ears, dinnin away in the sudden silence that had fallen between them. She wondered if the darkness of Mac's hid the telltale red in her cheeks. "That's going to be difficult," she heard herself say lightly. "To make a feature story go, you need *some* personal details, Dane."

"Not if you are the reporter you claim to be, Mountain Flower." The drawl was back in his voice. "That's my condition. There'll be no glimpses into my personal past, Linet, no gossip about my days at Harvard." As she remained silent he added, "If you can't handle it, I'll phone Surran now and suggest he find someone who can play by my rules."

His words braced her, stiffened her spine, and made her lift her chin. "I can handle it," she snapped.

"Good." He glanced at his watch. "It's about time I got back to the hospital and James. Are you an early riser?"

She nodded. "The studio keeps me up

late and gets me up early."

"Early to bed and early to rise." The amusement was back in his eyes. "How admirable. In your case, of course, the thought of going to bed is more pleasing, but . . ."

She got up so swiftly she nearly upset her water glass. "I had a condition, too, remember? If you don't stick to your side of the bargain, I'm walking out now."

"I don't recall making such an agreement," he drawled, "but since you insist, all right, Mountain Flower. I'll go just as far as you let me." He gave a loud, patently false sigh. "I'll refrain from attacking you even though desire for you makes me grow weak and faint."

"Don't be ridiculous," she snapped. "I'll telephone you when I have the time set for tomorrow's interview."

"Good." He rose, too, smiling down at her, offering her his hand. She took it hesitantly and felt the cool electricity of his strong clasp. Again she remembered Pete's demands that she get Dane's personal story. Maybe I can talk him out of that, she thought. I hope I can. Under Dane's searching gray gaze she felt suddenly unsure.

"I know, it's difficult to get under Vestry's skin. But I have every confidence in you, Lin. So far you've done an incredible job."

The interview was shot at nine-thirty the next morning in Dane Vestry's hotel suite. It went far more smoothly than such a rushed interview had a right to go.

"Thank you, Dane."

"I should thank you." Dane rose from

his armchair, quite confident and at ease. He turned to her, holding out a cup of coffee, which she took slowly. "I'd like you to meet some guests. Business guests."

Linet felt a flush of excitement warm her cheeks. "You'll be closer to me than any person has been in my career," he had said, and now it was beginning. She nodded.

"The business meeting shouldn't last more than an hour at the most," he said pleasantly. "Afterward we will be attending the lunch I'm hosting at Jimmy's Harborside. I believe you're going to set up there at twelve-thirty, so that you can catch parts of the luncheon on film."

"You mentioned meeting business guests?" she asked.

He looked grave. "Important business guests. Your assignment really begins today, now. I've asked four men to meet at the suite before we go to lunch. There'll be too many people at Jimmy's for private talk."

"You'll recognize their names. I want you to listen to what's said and observe their reactions to what I have to say."

She was aware of the tension in his quiet voice. "Does this meeting matter so much?" she asked, and when he nodded she felt a strange, almost overwhelming desire to offer all the help she could give.

A few moments later there was a knock on the door and Dane introduced the men to her. He briefly explained that she was on board for publicity purposes, then offered his guests refreshments.

A general discussion ensued and Linet withdrew to a corner of the suite to watch each man's reaction, as Dane had asked her to do. She had been impressed when Pete Surran told her of Dane's reputation. Well, now she'd seen it at work.

When the men finally left, she turned to face a thoughtful Dane. For a moment he

seemed far away, almost unaware of her presence. Then he smiled.

"How'd I do, boss?" he asked.

"I think very well."

All his tension, every trace of his earlier mood, had vanished, and his eyes held a conqueror's gleam. That—and something else. "You sound sure of yourself," she said.

"I should be. I always get what I want."

Unhurriedly he crossed to where she stood, his stride muffled by the carpet. He rested his hands on her shoulders, and she felt the heat of them through her clothing, felt the wild pulse in her throat and the drumbeat of her blood.

"Don't you know I get what I want, Linet?" He murmured. Then he lowered his dark head to hers. Without consciously willing it, her face rose to meet his. Her eyes closed, head tilted back as she waited for the touch of his lips on hers. Time ceased to matter as slow, deliberate, sure lips took hers prisoner. His tongue moved sensuously, tracing the curve of her lips, then tasting the intimate recesses of her mouth. His arms tightened about her, and she leaned against him, her breasts straining against her blouse.

She must be insane to let him touch her and move her this way. Linet pulled her mouth from his, gazing into smoky gray eyes alight with that thrill of conquest, the excitement of pursuit and capture. She knew he could read her desire in her gently swollen mouth, the taut swell of her breasts, the quiver in her arms. She closed her eyes, pushed with both hands against the unyielding hardness of his chest. To her surprise he let her go and stepped away from her.

"You said—you promised it would be business between us," she whispered.

"Surely you haven't forgotten?" His drawl was soft. "I said I'd go only as far

as you let me."

And I let you kiss me like that, she thought. You *knew* I'd let you. She pulled herself together, tried to assume her pose of crisp efficiency. "I'd say it was time to start for the restaurant," she said. "Your guests will be arriving at Jimmy's."

He smiled down at her. "Regrettably, you're right."

Pete called Linet into his office shortly after she and her crew returned from Dane's luncheon and asked for a report on her progress with the two-part story. She was still overwhelmed by the affair at Jimmy's.

"Name anybody who *is* anybody and that person was at the lunch," she told Pete. "Financiers, bankers, presidents of corporations and conglomerates, intellectuals, Harvard professors, political figures."

Pete nodded, pleased. "Don't forget that we're going to intersperse his business activities with glimpses from his personal life. How's the personal feature coming?"

Linet hesitated. "Pete, I'm not sure about it at all."

He interrupted her. "I know, it's difficult to get under Vestry's skin. But I have every confidence in you, Lin. So far you've done an incredible job. You've got him trusting you, eating out of your hand." He smiled benignly at her. "Good work, girl."

Before she could answer another reporter entered the room and she was dismissed.

Early-morning sunlight spilled through the undrawn drapes and onto the gilt of the Louis Quinze desk, and Linet yawned as she pushed away her portable typewriter. She had risen at dawn and pulled on jeans and an old, faded shirt so that she could

work on the two piles of notes on the ornate desk. One was a compilation of impressions and ideas for the second segment that was to be aired on *Hour by Hour*. The other pile was the start of the "personal" that Pete had demanded she do.

She hadn't wanted to start writing the personal story, and she'd had to force herself to begin. It seemed an invasion of privacy, not just Dane's but her own as well. Yet, as she began to describe the many facets of Dane Vestry's character, she found she had a lot to say.

She realized that he had spoken directly, simply, with a warmth that went to the heart as no kiss or caress had done.

The doorbell rang suddenly, surprising her. She started to her feet, then hesitated before slipping the closely typed sheets containing the personal report into a desk drawer. She was glad she had done so, for when she opened the door Dane was standing there.

"You look about ten years old," he said with a smile. "But, then, you have a penchant for answering the door in picturesque attire. I remember the costume you favored at the Mountainfoot Motel."

Her face felt warm, and she inwardly writhed that his banter could cause her to blush. "If you'll give me a couple of minutes, I'll be right with you. I hadn't realized you wanted to leave so early."

"You live well for a struggling reporter," he commented.

"I told you I was 'house' sitting—apartment-sitting, actually." She was glad to finally correct his misconceptions. "The owner is away in Europe."

"A friend of the family?"

"No, a friend of Pete's—Pete Surran, my boss," she explained. He did not comment further, so she added, "I'll go and change now. The notes are on the desk, and there's coffee in the kitchen if you'd like."

Linet quickly got dressed and returned to find Dane turning the last page of her notes.

"Now you look like the efficient young lady reporter." He tapped the sheets in front of him. "Good work," he said. "You're efficient, Linet Emmonds."

Again she felt a glow of pleasure at his praise. "You'll have to talk to my boss," she said, parrying the compliment with a smile. "To him I'm still a green young reporter."

Dane looked around at the apartment, then backed to her. "Oh, I suspect you please him well enough with your... work." She wondered whether she'd imagined the hesitation between those two words, but then he said; "Surely Pete Surran wouldn't find Beacon Hill apartments for just any struggling reporter he hired. You must be rather special to him."

"He's been good to me," Linet said earnestly. "He taught me a lot about TV reporting." She would have added more except that Dane got to his feet.

"I'm sure the man's a prince," he said shortly. "You can catalogue his virtues another time; however. We'd better be on our way."

Dane left Linet at the studio before going on to the hospital to see James. After an hour of hard work she called Ruth at the hospital.

"They've just taken James down to prepare him for the operation," she said.

"Isn't Dane with you?" Linet asked.

"He stayed till James was taken to be prepped. A man telephoned, though, and it sounded important, so I told him I was a

big girl and could stand on my big feet." Her voice broke. "James is so little, Linet. I hope they don't hurt him."

"Please try not to worry." Linet realized how inadequate that sounded. Ruth was miles away from home. She glanced at her schedule, then shrugged. All she needed to know was that James was a sick little boy and that Ruth was a stranger and all alone. She closed her assignments book and told a co-worker that she could be reached at the Eye and Ear.

Ruth was sitting on James's bed, a forlorn figure with flaming hair. A smile wavered on her pale face when she saw Linet walk through the door. "I'm glad of the company," she said feelingly. "I was getting ready to tear my hair out, just sitting here waiting."

"You don't look very good," Linet said. She frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Just tired, I expect."

"You should lie down," Linet said, but Ruth shook her head.

"Not until I know James is all right," she said. "Just talk to me. Help me keep my mind off things."

Linet searched her mind for a topic. "Tell me about Greenwaye," she said at last. "You must miss it."

The redhead's eyes grew soft. "I do. So does James. So did Dane, which is why he came back to Greenwaye when he did."

"Did you know Dane long, then?"

"Shoot, we grew up together. Dane and me and Jimmy—my husband—were always best friends. Hurts to remember those good times, too. We were all so young and happy. And then there was that coal-mine explosion." She paused, then added quietly, "Jimmy was killed in it."

"When did that happen?" Linet asked gently. She felt that Ruth wanted to talk about this sad time in her life.

"About four years ago. That was some

year. A lot of Jimmy's friends—my friends—had been hurt or killed and Greenwaye was in a bad fix. Dane came back to us then. He started Greenwaye Industries so that the other widows and I could have work to support ourselves. He did that for us. Nothing we could ever do for Dane would be enough," Ruth was saying.

They waited for a long time. Finally a nurse brought word that James was fine and in the recovery room.

"Now you do need to rest," Linet told Ruth, but the redhead was adamant. Not until James came out of recovery would she lie down.

"Ruth, let me stay with him. If he starts to wake up, I'll call you. You can see he's fine, and the doctor says his eye will be as good as anyone's. Please get a little rest before you fall down in your tracks."

Ruth finally allowed herself to be persuaded, and Linet sat down beside James's bed. She stroked the pale, thin cheek. He was still asleep, but his lips were pinkening and she smiled to think that he would have normal vision in the days to come. As she watched James, Ruth's words about Dane returned to her. It was plain that Ruth regarded Dane as a dear friend or brother, a realization that brought a sudden, unreasonable joy to Linet.

She was leaning over the bed many minutes later, checking James, when Dane came into the room. He looked astonished to see her there.

"Where is Ruth?" he asked. She explained, and he said, "That was good of you." She realized that he had spoken directly, simply, with a warmth that went to the heart of her as no kiss or caress of his had done.

She hesitated. "She told me about why you began Greenwaye Industries. She said that you and her late husband were

friends."

"We were like brothers. Ruth is like my little sister." For a second his eyes were raw with feeling, then the look faded. "I'm glad that you and Ruth had a chance to talk. Talking about the old days, leaving you with James, proves she likes you and trusts you."

She spoke quietly even though her heart was beating faster. "There was a time when you didn't trust me at all," she said. Their eyes met and though he made no move to touch her, the look in his eyes was like a caress.

"I don't feel that way now."

Jimmy chose this moment to stir, slowly murmuring a word that had to be, "Mom." Linet looked uncertainly at Dane. "I promised to fetch her as soon as he woke up. But, Dane, she's only had a few hours' rest."

"Mountain women are tough. Besides, she'll never forgive either of us if she isn't called." As Linet was about to leave the room he called her back. "Your boss left a message at the hotel inviting me to the airing of *Hour by Hour* tonight. That's scheduled to happen in an hour or so. If Ruth doesn't need us, we could drive down to the studio together."

"I'll get Ruth," Linet said. She hurried out of the room, turning Dane's words over in her mind. Dane trusted her, she thought. Ruth trusted her. And Pete Surran trusted her to do her job and to write that personal article that would establish her name.

The question was, could she write that article now? Did she dare?

"We'd better hurry," she said. "Pete will probably want to talk to you before *Hour by Hour* is aired, and traffic can be heavy this time of night."

"Don't worry, Linet. I'll get you to your studio in time, and your boss will continue being pleased with you," he

said. She looked up at him, saw again in his gray eyes the feeling of partnership that had been theirs when she conducted the interview. She raised her free hand with her fingers crossed, and he nodded and smiled. They silently watched the program and as it came to the end, Linet squeezed Dane's hand.

It was good, she thought, it was *very* good. And Pete obviously thought so, too.

"You did well, Lin," he said softly.

She felt herself actually sway with released tension, was conscious that she leaned against Dane's hard shoulder. She quickly pulled away. "Thanks," she said. "I think it went very well—thanks to Mr. Dane Vestry."

Dane's lips quirked into a smile. "I think Mr. Surran knows me better than that. I'm what's known as a tough interview. Any success you had, Linet, was your own."

Linet could barely bring herself to talk anymore. She was very tired, her mind muzzy with sleep. Suddenly she realized that if she didn't get home soon, she'd fall asleep where she stood. As she formed the thought, Dane was beside her.

"You're half asleep," he told her. "I've been watching you, and twice you started to drift off right in the middle of a sentence." He took her arm. "I'll drive you home."

She managed to say her good-byes decently, but the moment she was in the car, weariness descended like a heavy curtain. She couldn't keep her eyes open. "I don't know what's wrong with me," she apologized.

"I do. It's called reaction, Linet. You've been worried about a lot of things, and the tension just let go of you, that's all." He reached out an arm, drew her against his shoulder. "Just go to sleep."

Dimly she was aware of his voice talking to her, aware that she had shed her shoes and was curled up against him in the sleek, smooth-riding car.

His words generated desire again and she whispered, "But Dane—I want you."

"I want you too. There are many kinds of wanting, Linet."

Sometime later, she struggled to partial wakefulness. They had stopped, and he was leaning over her."

"Where's your key, Linet?" he was saying. "Is it in your purse?"

"Purse," she agreed, and tried to sit upright, but the movement made her dizzy.

"Don't try to move," he ordered. She heard his car door close, hers open. Now he was lifting her into his arms, holding her easily against his broad chest.

"I can walk," she protested, but he ignored her, began climbing the steps to her apartment. "Dane, let me down."

"Lower your voice," he said. "Do you want to cause a scandal in the neighborhood? Where's your bedroom, Linet?" he asked. She gave a soft gasp, and she heard the deep laughter in his next words. "I'm going to put you to bed, Mountain Flower. You're half asleep already."

"To the left," she heard her voice reply. She had slid an arm around his neck, could feel the steely ripple of his muscles against her skin. Hardly aware of what she did, she held him closer, tighter against her, heard the sharp intake of his breath, and then the difference in his kiss as his mouth found hers at last. His lips moved against her in a familiar, sensuous pattern, and her mouth responded, yielding to the sweet tyranny of

his tongue, which invaded, caressed, tormented her with longing.

"You promised me. We made an agreement," she whispered.

"Do you want me to keep my promise? But your body tells me you don't want to stop."

The blouse fell from her shoulders, a whisper of silk. She felt the light touch of his mouth on her throat, her shoulders as he slipped away her lacy bra. "Tell me if you want me to stop, Mountain Flower."

"No," she whispered shakily. "I... I don't."

"Your hair looks like gold in the moonlight," he said softly. He raised his hands to cradle her face, stroke her cap of hair. "I've thought about you when the moon shines like this. Thought of you lying in my arms. I've wanted to hold you ever since I walked into that hospital room and saw you popping balloons with James."

"Hold me now," she whispered.

"It's all right, Mountain Flower." She heard his voice against her ear, gentle, comforting. "Let me just hold you now. Loving would be too much for you tonight."

His words generated desire again, and she whispered, "But, Dane—I want you."

"I want you, too. There are many kinds of wanting, Linet." He drew her close against him, tucking her so close against the smooth, hard coolness of him that she suddenly felt like a chrysalis—half filled with desire, half content to sleep again.

"I just want to hold you tonight," she heard him say, and the strong arms around her tightened momentarily.

And as she slid from wakefulness to slumber she thought she heard him murmur words she answered in her heart.

Yes, Dane, yes. I love you, too.

"I wanted to tell you that you could have my heart to walk on if you wanted, but I was afraid you'd laugh."

Pete was still in last night's happy mood. He congratulated her again on the first of the two-part segment.

"I expect the second part of the exclusive to really shake up the business community," he went on. "When we mix the private life of Dane Vestry with his accomplishments here in the Hub, it'll be something else." He pointed a well-manicured finger at her. "I'm going to allocate a full fifteen minutes to the Vestry story, Linet, so make sure that it's a knockout."

Linet was struggling with words and feelings. As Pete spoke, all her negative feelings about the personal article on Dane rose to the surface. "Pete, about that personal," she said slowly. "I sort of promised Dane that I wouldn't invade his privacy, and I feel I can't go against that promise. I wish you'd reconsider."

He chose to misinterpret her words. "I know it's a hard job, but I have every confidence in you. You two are simpatico. I watched you last night, and he acted like a pussycat around you. You charm him into giving you that personal story, Lin." She started to protest, and he gave her the convincing smile Pete Surran was famous for. "Just do whatever it takes, all right? Just get that story."

His phone rang, and he kissed his fingers to her in dismissal. Linet was disturbed as she left his office. If she didn't give Pete the personal article, it would probably cost her her job. And yet, after last night, her conscience cried out

that any intrusion into Dane's personal life would be a betrayal. What was she to do?

The morning's assignment, a feature on the lack of summer employment around the Hub, kept her busy till noon. Then she hurried over to the hospital to see James. Today both patient and his mother looked much improved. Ruth's hair was tied in a jaunty bow; and James, eye patch over one eye, greeted her enthusiastically.

"Hi, Linet. Guess what? The operation didn't hurt. Guess why I'm wearing the eye patch."

She narrowed her eyes. "You're a secret spy for Darth Vader?" she suggested. His delighted laughter made her invent more and more bizarre explanations until Ruth called a halt to the game.

"That's enough. We don't want to get *too* excited, or the doctor mightn't let us go home at the end of the week." She turned to Linet. "I don't mind saying that I can't wait to see Greenwaye again."

"And Dane will be coming with us, too," James said triumphantly. Linet felt her smile tightening across her lips. Dane would be leaving soon. Well, what had she expected? He had a business to run in Greenwaye, too. But why had he not said anything to her? Surely, after their closeness last night...

Unless last night had meant nothing to him. Or worse, perhaps it had meant something—a scoring point in their game. "I'll go as far as you let me," he had told her, and Dane Vestry was a man who denied himself nothing, got what he wanted and damned the cost. As Ruth chatted on, Linet felt a part of her tighten, grow cold. She knew now that last night should never have happened. It would never have happened except that her weariness had left her vulnerable and open to the fascination she had always felt

for Dane.

Nothing in their situation had changed. She and Dane were not lovers but business associates. She'd been a challenge to him, that was all. I mustn't see him any more than is absolutely necessary, she thought. If I do...

Pete stared at her for a long moment. Linet held her breath, waiting for an explosion that never came.

"What, exactly, do you mean?" he asked.

"Pete, I don't want to do the personal feature on Dane Vestry. I never thought it was right, but you convinced me that it was part of my job. Now I don't agree with you." She felt her cheeks warm under his searching gaze. "I simply won't do it," she said.

He was smiling patiently. "Linet, you're being naive. Reporters are paid to invade other people's privacy. You're just overworked and tired." Pete wore his most benign expression. "Have you had dinner yet, Lin?"

She shook her head. "I was going to take off to Mac's as soon as I got through here."

"Take off now," he told her. "I'm the boss, remember? I can't have you fainting with weariness at the job." He paused, adding, "I'm heading for Mac's, too, and I'll buy you a beer."

She knew what he was doing, and shook her head. "It won't do any good, Pete. I won't do that personal feature," she said.

"Did I ask you to? I said I'd buy you a beer."

Pete made no mention of either Dane or the story as they walked to Mac's and ordered a beer. Then suddenly he shook his head. "You're throwing your career away, and for *what*? Has he asked you to marry him?"

"That has nothing to do with it," she cried, and he shook his head again. "Pete, I'm not refusing to do this personal just because Dane and I are seeing each other. I don't want to do it because it goes against what I believe."

He didn't seem to have heard her. "He hasn't asked you to marry him. Has he promised to take you back to the mountains, then?" Seeing the look on her face, he pursued the point. "What promise has he made to you, Linet?"

"I don't need any," she said, but her reply seemed foolish and naive. Pete patted her hand.

"Poor Linet, have you ever stopped to think what different lives you and Dane would lead? He'd be rubbing shoulders with the rich and the important, traveling, perhaps being interviewed by other—eager—reporters." He let the barb settle, then added, "And where will you be? I'll tell you, Lin. Back in the mountains, wondering where he is, wanting to be a part of the exciting kind of life you've led till now." He shook his head. "He'll be having fun and you won't have anything. Is that really what you want?"

Linet lay awake listening to the ornate gilt clock in the living room chime every half hour and then the hour itself, but Dane did not come.

Around dawn she gave up pretending to sleep and made herself some coffee. She restlessly went to her desk to find a pad of paper and jot down some of the things she wanted to accomplish. But instead of blank paper she found the list she'd started on the personal life of Dane Vestry. Her first reaction was to destroy her notes, but then she began to read them.

This was no news story. "It's like a love diary," she murmured, for even in the first curt notes she realized how her feel-

ings for Dane were coming alive on paper.

I'll keep these. I'll show them to him later, she told herself. He can see how I fell in love with him, little by little.

Setting down her coffee cup, she began to write another entry, a long, lyrical account of all that had happened during the last forty-eight hours. She wrote. "I wanted to tell you that you could have my heart to walk on if you wanted, but I was afraid you'd laugh."

At that moment the doorbell rang, surprising her. *Dane*, she thought, starting out of her chair.

But when she pulled open the door, a delivery man was there, holding a long white florist's box. Inside were a dozen red roses from Pete Surran.

She frowned a little as she read the note. "Lin, keep on doing a fine job for us," Pete had written. Trust the Silver Fox, she thought, to make a subtle gesture reminding her that she still worked for him and owed him loyalty. She carried the roses back into the apartment and hunted for a vase, and as she did she remembered the bouquet of wildflowers that Dane had given her the day they went to Foxx. The contrast between those mountain-blossoms, untamed and free, and these hothouse flowers was so great that she set down the vase and roses and her frown deepened.

No question, Pete was right. If she followed Dane to Greenwaye, her life would change in many ways. She asked herself if Eden would be enough, if long walks in Dane's mountains would satisfy everything within her. But surely Dane would not want her to give up everything she had worked for and learned. There'd be work for her as a TV or radio reporter in West Virginia. Failing that, she could work with Dane in his business enterprises. He'd told her he trusted her instincts and valued her judgments. If only

he were here now to give her his reassurance.

"He'll have all the fun and you'll have nothing," Pete's voice whispered in her ear. Angrily she filled a vase with water, set it on the desk, and began to arrange the flowers in it. Pete was wrong.

"Pieces of silver used to be the going rate, but I suppose in the modern business world a betrayal doesn't merit such returns."

Linet plunged into work, but through it all, a corner of her mind remained tuned to the hope that Dane would telephone. He did reach her later that afternoon.

"We broke up late last night and I didn't want to wake you." His voice was a caress, and she felt her body respond to his deep-toned voice. "I've been tied up all morning, but this evening will be ours, no matter what. Shall I pick you up at the studio, Mountain Flower?"

She hesitated. "No. Why don't you go straight to the apartment?" she suggested. "I keep a spare key taped underneath the doormat. Will you wait for me there?"

"Will I wait?" He seemed to consider her words, weigh them judiciously. "Perhaps only for a short time. Forever might do, to begin with." He added softly, "I think you know I love you. I thought of you so many times last night, the silk of your skin and the sweet scent of you, and the way your eyes turn to dark velvet when you're in my arms."

"Dane, I've missed you, too. And I'll tell you how much this evening."

"Show me, Mountain Flower," he

teased. "You remember I can go only as far as you'll let me. More would be breaking our agreement."

Evening was slow to come, but eventually the work was done and Linet was free.

With renewed energy she hurried up the stairs, threw open the door.

"Dane?" she called.

There was no answer. She called his name again, puzzled. She shut the door, dropped her reporter's equipment, began to walk down the hallway to the bedroom. And stopped. Dane was seated at the ornate desk in the living room, his dark head bent over a sheaf of papers he was holding.

Those notes—those notes on the private Dane Vestry. He was *reading* them.

She gave a small, involuntary gasp and he looked up, meeting her wide-eyed gaze with an inscrutable look on his own. He indicated the papers he was holding. "These make interesting reading."

He looked so large and powerful, so completely male, that he dwarfed the delicacy of the antique desk. "Dane, let me explain about those. I meant—"

He cut her short. "I know what you meant to do with this, Madam Reporter. Pete Surran assigned you a personal feature on me, didn't he? That's why he gave Greenwaye Industries so much air time. He wanted to regale the public with the private life of Dane Vestry."

"Dane, yes, Pete did tell me to do a personal feature on you. I started to collect material for it, but I never liked the idea and yesterday I told him I wouldn't do it."

"Which is why he sent you roses with such a pleasant card?" Sardonically he lifted Pete's card for her inspection, then dropped it among the discarded papers on the desk. "For services rendered, I imagine. I find myself asking what other ser-

vices you might have offered him."

"How dare you say that?" she cried, too hurt to see that the old, odd look had come into his eyes. It was gone immediately, his fury rising to white heat.

"Too bad the public won't have a chance to drool over the notes you kept on me. I'm flattered, really. What I said, what I did, how I looked at you—such insight into my heart and soul, Mountain Flower." She covered her ears against his mocking, softly raging voice, and he strode across the room to her, grasping her wrists, pulling down her hands as she cried out with surprised pain.

"Does that hurt? God, I hope it does. How much did Surran pay you for this piece on me?" She was silent and he added, "Pieces of silver used to be the going rate, but I suppose in the modern business world a betrayal doesn't merit such returns."

"I didn't betray you," she whispered.

"So you say." He dropped her wrists, stepped back. "You needn't worry, Linet. I won't touch you again. I only want to stay long enough to see you burn those notes."

She wanted to go to him, to touch him, to force him to look at her. "Dane," she began, "you have to listen to me."

Almost wearily he said, "Do it, Linet. You can burn the notes in the fireplace."

She carried the notes to the large, shallow grate and made a pile of them. There was a matchbox near the grate, and she lit a match and held the yellow flame to the paper. She didn't look up as the fire caught, consumed the white paper, but when the last sheet had turned to scorched ash, he spoke again.

"I want to make it plain, Linet. If you or your boss ever think of airing anything that I saw in those notes, anything at all, I'll ruin *Hour by Hour* and you. I'll tell this to Pete Surran myself, but right now

I'm telling you. Believe me, I can do it. I can destroy your credibility, your program, your peace of mind."

She turned to look up at him and saw that he was drawing something out of the pocket of his jacket.

"Don't look so unhappy, Linet. Surely another story will surface before long. Pete will give you another juicy bone to play with and you'll be able to use your charms to good advantage. Meanwhile, here's a consolation prize."

He snapped open the catch of the small black box he held. A blaze of light dazzled her for a moment, and she saw a ring, a diamond surrounded by spring green emeralds.

"I thought that this would make an appropriate engagement ring," he was saying with a bitter mockery that she sensed was directed mostly at himself. "Keep it, Mountain Flower. It should look well among your other trophies."

He placed the ring on the desk beside Pete's flowers. Then, without a backward look at her, he walked out of the apartment.

Linet slowly made her way to the office. She knew what she had to do and nothing could stop her.

She remembered what Dane had said about pieces of silver and betrayal. "We're special," Pete had said, meaning that reporters were above feelings, that stories had to be found in any possible way. She could not go through this again. She would not work for someone who asked her to sell her principles or her soul.

She signed the letter, slid it into an envelope, then walked steadily to Pete's dark office and entered it.

Linet walked forward and laid the letter gently on the big desk. Then, resolutely, she left the office. As she made her way out of the studio she felt as if in a few

hours she had hacked away everything that was dear to her in life.

"Linet, look at me."

No, she thought, I will not. But he stepped in front of her, forcing her to halt, forcing her to meet his eyes.

During the next few days Linet followed all the news printed about Dane. Since leaving Pete's show, she had severed the last cords between her and Dane by sending him back the diamond-and-emerald ring. This done, she had kept herself almost frenetically busy. She applied to many radio and TV networks, and also had a long interview with Pete Surran, who insisted she rethink her decision to leave. But she refused.

Weeks later she received an offer from a small television station in Pratsfield. She quickly packed, aching to be gone and rid of her memories. But she knew she would never be complete without Dane.

Once I leave here and go to Pratsfield, it'll be a whole new beginning. She forced herself to smile, to think hopefully.

Her thoughts went to powder. In the soft glow of the hall light she could see something lying on her doormat: a bouquet of flowers. She went closer, bent to pick it up, and caught her breath in a gasp that was like a sob. These were wildflowers gathered in the mountains.

"Dane," she whispered.

She held the bouquet tight against her, its fragrance drowning her senses. Dane had been here. Had been here not long ago, for the flowers were fresh.

Where was he now? With shaking fingers she unlocked the apartment door, called his name. Only the cardboard car-

tons, the disarray of her packing, answered her. She closed the door and backtracked down the hallway, down the steps and outside, where the first patterning drops of rain had begun to fall.

"Dane?" she whispered.

She looked around. There was no sign of his car.

Then, against all hope, she saw a man walking briskly some distance from her.

Dane," she shouted.

He did not hear her, so she started to run. She stumbled on her high heels, almost fell, and stopped to kick them off. She called him again and kept on running.

Her first wave of relief and joy made her run faster at first. Then she slowed. Though he had stopped, he made no move toward her. Something in that tight, controlled stance of his chilled her, made her suddenly aware of how she must look, soaking wet, shoeless, wild-eyed.

"Dane?" she queried uncertainly.

His tone was deliberate. "I see the rain caught you just as it caught me."

"I found the flowers," she began hesitantly. "I knew it was you who'd left them and I wanted to thank you. I thought I saw you walking down the hill...." There was a small silence, heavy and painful. "When did you get to Boston?"

"This evening. I flew into New York and then came the rest of the way by private plane. I had some pressing business that couldn't wait for the strike to end."

"Greenwaye Industries?"

"Greenwaye Industries," he said. "I also thought I would try to see you." She caught her breath but his voice was cool as he continued. "I felt I needed to apologize to you. I telephoned your boss and Surran exonerated you completely. Said you'd disliked the idea of that personal feature from the first, that you'd left the network because he had insisted on the feature."

She nodded, unable to speak.

"I jumped to conclusions when we met last." Another painful pause hung between them before he added, "What I said was unforgivable, but please try to understand."

She knew she would be lost if she stood here longer, and began without another word, to backtrack. She was blinded by the rain and her tears, but she could hear his voice.

"Linet, look at me."

No, she thought, I will not. But he stepped in front of her, forcing her to halt, forcing her to meet his eyes.

"I love you so much," she whispered.

His arms gathered her to him, not in a crushing embrace but a gesture so infinitely tender that it seemed to break her heart with sudden happiness. "I was afraid you wouldn't want to see me," he told her. "I got the ring, and knew how much I'd hurt you. I was afraid that if I telephoned you or wrote to you, you'd tell me to go to hell. You'd have had every right. I told myself to forget you, but I couldn't." He held her tighter. "I'd go up into the mountains and the eagles called your name. When the mist rose, I remembered the way I had held you in my arms. Finally I knew I had to come back and try to see you again."

"And I've missed you so much...."

"...never let you go again. Linet, marry me. Tomorrow. Now. We'll wake up a justice of the peace."

With a cry, she flung herself into his arms. They stood so closely bound together, no longer to be two but one.

After a long while Linet sighed. "You're crushing my flowers, Mountain Man," she whispered dreamily.

For answer he lifted her into his arms, strong arms that held her close against him. "There'll be plenty more in Eden, my love," he promised. ♥

THE DISDAINFUL MARQUIS



Everyone assumed that Catherine Robins was just another of the "duchess's doxies"—even the man to whom she would have given all, but who despised her for what he thought she was.

By EDITH LAYTON

The dowager Duchess of Crewe had lived a long and boring life, up until the time she was a widow in her sixties. Then, with no more stuffy duke to encumber her, she turned to a new way of life.

She had heard of the sort of life one could lead if one were wealthy and titled—the gambling establishments, the fast parties, the masquerades and travel adventures of those select few who cared for nought but pleasure and excitement. And knew that as a duchess she could have entree to any of them. But that there would have to be something special about her to permit her constant presence.

That was when her life was altered by the inclusion in it of a new companion, Miss Violet Peterson, who was nothing like any lady's companion the duchess had ever seen. She was more like the sort of female who ran the gaming halls.

Violet was buxom and red haired, and staggeringly attractive. Men's heads swiveled when she flounced into the room.

It was during that first season with Violet, at the country home of a notoriously dissolute duke, that the first whispers about Violet came to the duchess's ears. One late evening at the

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faro table, a noted gossip leaned over to the duchess. "I say," he said in a loud stage whisper, "did you know that your companion has spent more time between our host's sheets than her own? And for a price higher than the stakes we're competing for?"

Two high red spots appeared on the duchess's cheekbones. All the others at the table were listening. She decided to brazen it out, and, in a somewhat confused state of agitation, referred instead to what she felt were Violet's good qualities.

"Let the gel be," she said in stentorian tones. "She gives good service. Worth every penny she asks."

The duchess was a raging success after that. She and Violet were welcome to every affair they wanted to attend. The duchess, through no overt act of her own, was now considered an amusing, clever, and charming eccentric.

After a season with Violet in tow, Rose came along, introducing herself as a friend of Violet's. The duchess hired her as well. Rose was blond and billowy and friendly, and within months the duchess's reputation was assured.

But now in this chill winter of 1814, Violet had just sent notice she wasn't coming to Paris as she had netted the Marquis of Wolverton's protection. And Rose, that simple ingrate, had come and prated on about true love and the reformed gambler with whom she was going to settle down.

Even the Duchess of Crewe could not advertise for a trollop. And she had no notion of how to go about acquiring one as companion. One couldn't just pick a girl off the streets. So she cast her net again, asking employment bureaus for a companion and hoping to luck upon, by accident, another woman like Violet.

And it was in response to just such an

advertisement that Miss Catherine Robins, newly arrived in London, sought out the address in a fog so thick that she almost collided with a pair of gentlemen.

"My pardons, miss," said the closer of the two. "It's this confounded fog. Are you all right?"

A deeper voice intruded.

"Cyril, the lady is fine. I suggest we move on so that she can reach her destination." Catherine peered up to the speaker, who was so very tall that the fog, in a show of frivolity, shrouded his face as it might have done a mountain peak. He was dressed in unobtrusive grays that further blended with the day.

Seeking to end the conversation promptly, and yet not be rude, for these gentlemen might be friends of the duchess, she inquired in a polite, modest tone of the taller one, who had in no way shown an inclination to behave toward her in an improper fashion. "Is this the Duchess of Crewe's address? In the fog, I cannot be sure."

"Oh, yes," the taller gentleman answered in an amused tone, "to be sure it is. Never fear, you have come to the right place."

There was that in his voice, the undercurrent of sarcasm, that made Catherine look at him again. She found herself looking into a pair of icy gray eyes that seemed as if they still held the depths of the fog in them. He was very handsome, Catherine thought with alarm, lowering her eyes from his frank stare, and very insolent.

Catherine rang the doorbell, and was admitted to a huge hall filled with women waiting to be interviewed. All were older than she, and much more serious-looking. Catherine's heart sank.

But woman after woman was called in to see the duchess, and each one emerged looking piqued or angry after only a few moments. And then Catherine was called.

The butler opened a door, and Catherine found herself facing the duchess.

The duchess stood ramrod straight in back of a huge mirror-polished walnut desk. "Well," she said, "now this is more like it. Who are you, my gel?"

Catherine fumbled her papers out and laid them carefully on the desk. "Catherine Robins, Your Grace," she said in a low voice.

"I have a lot of gentleman friends, and I'd expect you to make them comfortable too, if you get my meaning."

"Tell me, my gel," the duchess said, "got any experience of life?"

"Well, yes, ma'am," Catherine faltered, not knowing quite what the duchess was getting at.

"Not frightened of men, are you? Or prudish? I can't stand a prude."

"Not at all," Catherine replied, thinking she was more frightened by the duchess than by any man she had ever met.

"Very well," the duchess said, "your job would be to travel with me and to make sure I'm comfortable. I have a lot of friends. A lot of gentlemen friends, and I'd expect you to make them comfortable too, in a different way. You get my meaning?"

Catherine didn't at first. The first meaning she thought of was clearly preposterous and she was ashamed of herself for even thinking it. But she certainly was conversable and tactful enough to chat up any old gentlemen the duchess entertained to put them at their ease. So she nodded, so many thoughts crossing

her mind that she was momentarily speechless.

"Good." The duchess sighed. "I thought I was right about you. I'm off to Paris in a month."

"Paris?" breathed Catherine, unable to take in her good luck. Was she being offered the position, in Paris?

"But let us get it clear. I travel in a fast set. Are you worried about what people will say of your reputation?"

Catherine had the giddy instant thought of a group of old gentlemen and ladies being pushed rapidly in their invalid chairs or gambling wildly in their nightcaps while their attendants and nurses stood waiting to take them home to bed.

"My reputation?" Catherine thought quickly, searching for a precise answer that would satisfy the duchess as to her maturity and independence and put an end to this odd interview and perhaps win her the position she so desperately wanted. "My reputation," she said loftily, "is my own concern."

The duchess beamed. "Fine then, gel, you've got the position."

Meanwhile, only three doors down the street, two gentlemen sat in front of a cozy fire.

"Sinjun," cried the younger one. "a toast to the luckiest of chaps. Did you see the eyes on that filly? Blue as a summer sky. And moving in here right under your nose. You just have to nip down the street and collect her."

"I don't," the taller man said, stretching out his long legs, "traffic with the duchess's companions. I seldom pay for what should be free."

"What a lost opportunity for you then," Cyril mourned. "Still, a toast! To the fairest wenches in London, to the dowager's doxies."

"I think not," his companion demurred.

red.

"Then one to the old lady herself: to the dirty dowager."

"No," his friend said gently. He took his glass in hand and intoned, "A toast to work." And he handed the papers to his friend. Cyril groaned. "To work," and dashing down the drink, he handed a sheaf of papers to St. John Basil St. Charles, Marquis of Bessacarr.

The marquis snorted when he read them.

"Damn it, Cyril," he swore, with unaccustomed vehemence, "I thought it was to be Vienna. That is where all the business is going on. What earthly good can I do for you in Paris?"

His friend sat and watched the marquis in his travels around the carpet.

"It's a hotbed over there now according to the old man," Cyril said, "with some supporting the old Bourbon and some still working for Bonaparte."

"Paris it is, then," the marquis said derisively. "I will have to pack my dancing slippers and summon Jenkins."

Catherine, meanwhile, was finding nothing at all to do as the duchess's companion. And the other servants seemed to avoid her, almost as though they looked down on her.

However in the sixth day of her employment, Catherine received a summons to be present at her employer's side.

The duchess was sitting up in bed when Catherine was shown into her chamber. She squinted up at Catherine and then motioned her to sit down.

"There you are. Been settling yourself in, gel?" she boomed at Catherine.

"Yes, Your Grace. I have been waiting for your summons, and ready to be of whatever assistance you require."

"Why would I require your assistance here, in my own house?" the duchess asked with amazement. "I'm getting all my

plans in train for our little jaunt. Paris! I can't wait. I called you here to see if you're ready."

"I'll be ready to leave at a day's notice," Catherine said.

"A day's notice." The older woman guffawed. "Not likely. Not with what all I've got to get readied. What are you wearing?" she demanded suddenly, staring at Catherine fixedly.

Whereas the outside of the shop was plain, the interior reminded Catherine of what she had always imagined a harem to look like.

Catherine glimpsed down at herself in horror, wondering whether she'd spilt something on her gown. But no, it was the neat pristine gray one she'd worn the first morning.

"It's ghastly," the duchess went on. "I don't know what your game is, and I don't care. Maybe there's some that like a gel that looks like a nun, but it won't do. You've got to dress with some dash. I can't have a little mouse, no matter how saucy a mouse, trailing through Europe with me. You've got to be toggled out right. Go to Madame Bertrand. She'll set you up."

The maid who suffered to accompany Catherine to Madame Bertrand's sat opposite her and looked everywhere but at her. The duchess, Catherine thought, must be a high stickler for the social order of her servants.

Opening the door to the modiste's establishment was like opening the door onto a new reality. Whereas the outside of the shop might have been discreet to the

point of plainness, the interior reminded Catherine of what she had always imagined a harem to look like. There was a quantity of rich fabric tossed about a large carpeted room. Couches and divans stood at odd angles everywhere. Bolts of scarlet velvet, royal blue gossamer, and shining emerald silks lay opened and half opened, spread out for display over all unoccupied surfaces.

A small black-eyed woman approached, wearing a quantity of measuring tapes about her neck, as if they were a priceless necklace. Catherine held out the duchess's note.

"I am Catherine Robins, the Duchess of Crewe's companion. She sent me here to purchase some gowns."

"Right," said the little woman smartly. "You're going to Paris. You're dressed for a convent now. Come along, I'll take things in hand."

"I can't possibly appear like this in public." Catherine cried out, fifteen minutes later, as the dressmaker told her to turn around. "I am a companion, not an actress. This gown is lovely, but it is not seemly."

It was of a rich and ruby red, and it was so low in front that even her spanned hand could not cover the naked expanse it showed. Looking down, she could clearly see her breasts as they appeared to her when she was in her bath. The waist was high and its folds clung and draped about her lower person so that she seemed to have been mired in some rich red sea kelp that outlined all her lower body. Her hair, untidy from changing so often, curled around her face in damp wisps. The whole effect was that of a wanton.

"No," she said desperately, "I know the duchess would never approve."

The dressmaker snorted.

"In a pig's eye, my girl. Didn't I have the entire dressing of Violet? And then

Rose? Never fear, the duchess will approve. Come," she said, more kindly, "it's the very thing. It's all the rage."

At that moment, a gentleman appeared in the doorway of the shop. Catherine looked over and saw his amused gray eyes staring at her insolently. It was incredible how she had not forgotten a detail of his face since that morning in the fog. He stood leaning against a mantel, his long athletic form impeccably clothed in gray. His face resembled, Catherine thought, a picture she had seen of a red Indian, with his cool angular good looks, high cheekbones, and black hair. But his look held mockery and disdain and an infuriatingly belittling humor.

He glanced over at the dressmaker. "I applaud you, madame," he drawled, "as I am certain the duchess will. You have turned a little country mouse into a dazzler. Congratulations."

He walked slowly over to where Catherine stood poised for retreat, although perversely refusing to flee in the face of his impudence.

"I see you found the right place, little one." He smiled with what was not at all a smile. His eyes lingered at her breasts, and while her hands itched to fly up and cover herself, she only stood stock still and tried to return his stare with all the dignity she could muster. "See if you can make my mistress something on this order," he said to Madame Bertrand. "It is a most impressive display of... taste." And then, with a careless shrug, he turned and went back to the blond female, who was darting glances of the purest dislike at Catherine.

"Who," Catherine panted, stripping herself out of the hated dress with fever in the curtained alcove, "was that insolent man? That popinjay, that man who spoke to me?"

"He is the Marquis of Bessacarr," the dressmaker said placidly. "A neighbor of the duchess's. I expect that's how he knows you. And you should be flattered that he did. He doesn't acknowledge everyone, you know."

"He need not acknowledge me," Catherine insisted, setting herself aright again. "He need not ever acknowledge me again."

Catherine swore to herself, on the way home in the carriage with the stony-faced maid, that she would sit up nights if need be, adding on fabric to those indecent bodices. Style or no, she was never again to be ogled in that fashion.

She encountered the Marquis in the street from time to time over the next couple of weeks. When their paths crossed, he invariably would take note of her, to her distress. For he took special care to say something cryptic to her in passing. "It's a good life, isn't it, little one?" he said once, smiling, and, "My regards to your employer. Why does she still keep you under wraps?" She steadfastly and properly ignored him.

The day before they were to leave for Paris, she met him again.

"All ready for your little trip?" he inquired politely.

"Yes. Thank you. Quite ready," Catherine answered.

"Yes," he drawled. "you'd best be hurrying home, little ladybird. Your house may well be afire. Reinforcements have arrived."

On her return home, she was ushered into the study.

There was a woman sitting at the desk opposite the duchess. Her red hair was a tumble of curls, pulled back with a simple green ribbon. Her figure was full and imposing and her green walking dress was afroth with lace. Her eyes were large

and brown, with the darkest, longest lashes Catherine had ever seen.

"Look who's here," the duchess said wryly. "It's dear Violet. And she's consented to come with me on my little jaunterings. She and I have some business to iron out. I'll call you later, Go now." She waved again, as Catherine stood there, staring like a ninny at the magnificent lady who made her feel all of two years old.

At last Catherine nodded and fled up the stairs.

Really, Catherine thought, the women of London thought no more of nudity before other females than before a cake of soap.

"So," the duchess said, smiling hugely, "what do you think of your little replacement, Violet?"

"Quite the ingenue," Violet answered. "but I don't think she's up to snuff."

"Perhaps, but you'd be there to show her the ropes, wouldn't you, dear Violet?"

The magnificent female in the green walking dress relaxed the tight set of her shoulders. Up to this point she had not known if the old dragon was actually going to take her on again. But resiliency was her best asset, so she masked her surprise and said laconically, "Oh, I'll see to it that she doesn't embarrass you. I know what I'm about."

Later, Violet and Catherine got acquainted.

"What did you do before the old lady hired you on?" Violet asked disinterestedly.

Catherine, a little shocked at the familiarity with which Violet spoke of her employer, but not wanting to appear to be a prig and start the relationship off on the wrong foot, let the remark pass and merely said, "I lived with my brother-in-law and stepsister."

"And I lived with the pixies at the foot of the garden," Violet mocked.

Catherine looked nonplussed.

"Lord," Violet sighed, "I'm going to be going across the face of Europe with Juliet. Well, you really landed in gravy hiring on with the dowager." She yawned. "I'm for a quick kip," she said, and without further comment, she began to unbutton the bodice of her gown. She stripped as though she were alone in the room. Catherine hastily retreated.

Really, Catherine thought, seeking the refuge of her own room, the women of London thought no more of nudity before other females than they did of nudity before a cake of soap.

They caught the packet for France the next day. Catherine tried not to goggle. There were gentlemen in the first cry of fashion. The ladies wore rich garments and trailed retinues of servants. Everyone boarding seemed to know each other, and the duchess nodded and smiled her tight little smile at gentlemen who bowed and ladies who stared. Gracie, her maid, like so many of the other servants only kept her attention on her mistress. But Violet, Catherine noted, behaved exactly as the duchess did, nodding and acknowledging old acquaintances. Evidently, Catherine thought, the companions of great ladies were treated exactly as their mistresses were.

At her cabin door, the duchess told Violet:

"I shall rest. But you go up on deck. And take her with you," she added, pointing to Catherine. "Let them get a

look at her before we sail. That'll tickle them right enough."

When Violet and Catherine went up on deck, Catherine noticed a small altercation taking place between the captain and a stunning attractive blond female. As they approached, Catherine heard Violet give out a low startled exclamation.

"Coo, now here's a turn. Look who's landed on us."

"There," the blonde cried, noticing Violet. "Just ask her."

"Excuse me, miss," the captain said, wiping his brow, "but this lady says that the Duchess of Crewe is expecting her."

"Hello, Rose, old thing," Violet said, with a slightly twisted smile. "Allow me to present Miss Catherine Robins, Her Grace's new companion," she added to the captain. "It's true that the duchess knows Miss Tomkins."

The captain shrugged, content to have the burden of decision taken from him. Rose turned to go below deck. Violet spotted someone she knew in a clutch of travelers who were standing and joshing with each other by the rail. She left Catherine's side and disappeared into a crowd of people.

Catherine walked on alone. She felt uneasy about walking by herself in a crowd of strangers, for she knew it was not the sort of thing a young female should do. But the duchess had told her to go for a stroll, and Violet seemed to find nothing amiss with it.

However, she was so flustered when one young gentleman swept her a bow and gave a white-toothed smile, and so distracted when another elderly gentleman grinned most improperly at her that she found herself a quiet corner of the rail and positioned herself there, staring pointedly out at the shore.

She heard a familiar voice at her elbow. "Well," he said, "and so the little country

mouse takes to the sea at last. Are we to have the pleasure of your company all the way to Paris?" Ah, but my manners—allow me to introduce you. Jenkins, this is the Duchess of Crewe's latest companion, Miss Robins. Allow me to present Robert Jenkins, my friend and my traveling companion."

Catherine, turning and dipping a little curtsey, was further confused when she saw the gentleman she had been introduced to. For while the marquis, she noted, was dressed quietly but splendidly in dove gray and black in the peak of fashion, the shorter, muscular older man at his side was dressed as soberly and unobtrusively as any of the valets she had seen in the trail of their employers. Could it be that he was introducing her to his valet? But she smiled up at Jenkins when she saw the sympathetic look on his grizzled homely square face.

"How do you do," she said.

"Delight to meet you, Miss Robins," he said in a gravelly voice, "but you must excuse me now. For I've things to see to."

***Catherine drew breath in fury.
"My job is to be a companion.
And whatever else you may be
thinking, please disabuse
yourself."***

He bowed and took his leave, but the marquis seemed content to lounge at Catherine's side. "Still unused to London society, aren't you?" he asked. "Fear not. I shall help you. For, God help me, I know every soul aboard this packet. There," he said, turning his eyes toward a red-faced gentleman with bulging eyes, "is Old Hightower. He lives in high style;

but don't be fooled. His estates are mortgaged to the hilt. Don't waste a second on him, little one. And there's Prendergast. Comely enough—there, that sort of a willowy-looking chap. . . . Fancies himself a deep thinker, and he'll make up a poem for you the moment you flutter those incredible eyelashes at him! But he's as tight with a penny as a drum. And ah, there's Lord Hunt—pass him by, child, pass him by. Drinks, you know, and forgets all of his promises in the morning. But now there, by his elbow, there's Sir Lawrence. That's one to keep your eye on. Old, but not infirm yet, and a chap who comes down handsomely when he's pleased. And he's not hard to please."

Catherine drew breath in fury. "My job is to be a companion. And whatever you may be thinking, please disabuse yourself of the notion that I am looking for a husband. I am here to be Her Grace's companion. To work, not to set my cap at anyone."

The marquis stopped and looked at her with an arrested expression in his eyes. He stared down into her face, seeing the genuine anger there. Then he gave a shout of laughter that caused others on the deck to stare for a moment at them.

"Wonderful," he said. "The indignation, the heated countenance, all wonderful. Unless, it could be. . . . No, I am not so wet behind the ears. Still," he said, in a considering way. "What do you think of dear Violet?"

"Why, she is a delightful companion," Catherine said stoutly.

"And what of the duchess's outline of duties?" he asked in a warmer tone.

"Unexceptional," she replied.

For once the marquis himself seemed puzzled. He gave her one more lingering look and then straightened. "I shall see you again, I am sure." And bowing, he left.

Rose was in her cabin, along with Violet, when Catherine returned to it.

"I've gotten my old job back," Rose informed her. "Imagine, the duchess is going with three companions this time!"

Rose was fair and blonde, with a full figure and a warm, comfortable manner. She had fine large brown eyes and a high bosom and a head of flaxen hair. But she was not so elegantly stylish as Violet. Rather, she was comfortable and plushy looking, and as she prattled on in her soft voice, it was impossible not to warm to her.

"Don't worry, Catherine," Rose went on. "There's plenty to go round for all three of us, seeing as how the duchess means to hit all the high spots."

"Enough of what to go round?"

"Enough gentlemen, of course, dear," Rose said, with puzzlement. "Even though there'll be three of us, we're all so different, there'll be money enough for all of us to make. I'll never cut into your takings, dear," she said, eyeing Catherine's pale face with distress. "Never fear, we'll get on beautifully, like three sisters."

Later, Catherine stood at the deck and gripped the rail tightly. A great many things made sense to her now—from the duchess's servants' attitudes to the attitude of Madame Bertrand, to even the marquis' mocking comments.

The artless Rose had prattled on and on till she had erased all doubts. As incredible as it seemed, Rose and Violet were women of low repute. And here she was, Catherine Robins, traveling companion to a duchess and two highly paid cyprians. And presently almost penniless and precisely in the midst of the English Channel.

The worst, she thought sadly, was done. All those that had seen or met her thought her on a par with Rose and Violet.

The best thing would be to go home at

once. But the duchess paid wages quarterly, and she had made it clear there would be no exceptions.

She bent with her head cradled in her arms, by the rail of the ship, cold within and without, until a light touch on her arm recalled her to herself.

"Why, Miss Robins, are you ill?" Jenkins' voice asked softly.

She looked up to see his concerned face close to hers. She was tempted to blurt out her whole wretched story to him, stranger though he was. But then another familiar voice said, "The sea is not always kind to newcomers. Our little country mouse has strayed too far from her farmhouse."

Catherine wondered suddenly if she could confide in the marquis. He, of all the people on the ship, was a familiar face.

But before she could speak again, he smiled, not at all kindly, and said, "No, she's not a bit afflicted with mal de mer, Jenkins. Rather, I think, Miss Robins is afflicted with a surfeit of companionship. Her cabin is literally bulging at the seams. The fair Rose has joined Violet, and now the duchess has a veritable bower of pretty flowers in her employ. But never fear," he said, laying one gray-gloved hand across her cheek to tuck back in an errant wind-whipped curl. "There are many gentlemen aboard who are weary of hothouse blossoms and who will welcome a fresh young English nosegay such as yourself."

All of Catherine's fears and shame coalesced into hatred toward the marquis. He had dashed all her nebulous hopes of escape to bits with his words. She looked at him with brimming eyes.

"I find your humor ill bred," she said. "And your inferences impertinent. Good day." And she turned on her heel and walked off.

"Didn't she carry that off well?" the

marquis laughed.

"I think you're being a bit hard on her, lad," Jenkins said reproachfully.

The marquis' face hardened and he turned to look out to sea.

Catherine went back to her cabin to make amends to Rose and Violet. The way she had dashed out in the face of Rose's revelations had been cruel.

She found Rose with the top of her gown down, carefully applying rouge to the tips of her breasts.

"I am very sorry," she said. "about the way that I behaved. It was wrong of me to have given you the impression that I was disapproving or angry at you."

"Oh there, there, my dear," Rose cried, "we didn't take anything amiss, did we, Vi?"

"That is very kind of you," Catherine said, and then, turning her large anxious eyes to both of them in turn, she asked, hesitantly. "But there is something I must ask you...ah... Does Her Grace require you to—to do what you do?"

"Oh, Lord love you, no," Rose laughed, to Catherine's relief. "That is not the case at all."

"Then I can stay on," Catherine asked hopefully, "as companion, and nothing else?"

"Of course you can," Rose said.

Catherine was still nervous, and her spirits were not improved when they arrived at their hotel in Paris, and the duchess said, "Here, get yourselves suited out fine and go down to the lobby; let the word go out that I have arrived. Then we'll see

those invitations pour in."

Catherine, you're free to do as you wish. Go tag along with Rose and Violet if you like. Just be sure to tell everyone that you talk to that the Duchess of Crewe has arrived. That should do it. Now, Gracie, my hair, if you please."

And, sitting back and enjoying her hair being brushed, the duchess closed her eyes and settled into reveries of a future full of balls and fetes, or scandals and sensations.

In spite of the duchess's confidence, Catherine was amazed when she answered the duchess's summons the next day. Sure enough, a dozen invitations lay on the duchess's desk.

"Tonight," the duchess said to her companions, "dress up smartly, for we're off to no less than Count D'Arcy's ball."

Catherine wore a high-waisted gown in creamy white satin, and bound her hair back with a pure white ribbon. The neckline was very low, but it had looked so perfect just as it had come from Madame Bertrand's that she had not dared tamper with it.

She went to Rose's room, to find Rose with the top of her gown down, carefully applying rouge from a little pot to the tips of her breasts.

"It's to give my gown a better look, you see," she said, rapidly completing the job and lifting the top of her gown back on.

"It's to give the gentlemen an extra treat a little later," Violet said. "If a chap's going to spring for the pleasure of Rose's company, he expects to find something out of the ordinary."

"See here, Catherine," she continued. "Rose and I, we are what we are. We can't watch what we say and what we do every moment you're about. You'll have to take us for what we are."

Catherine swallowed hard. And then she spoke.

"I know that, Violet. I cannot be an ostrich with my head in the sand."

Rose had a sudden thought. "You know, Catherine, it won't be all bad for you. For there's heaps we can tell you about gentlemen. If more young misses knew what we know, fewer gentlemen would have to seek us out."

The talk turned to the evening ahead.

"Am I dressed properly?" Catherine asked.

"A treat," Rose said. "But perhaps a little too refined. Her Grace wants you to catch all eyes. Who will see you across a room? In candlelight, you'll just fade away."

"You're right, Rose," Violet said, regarding Catherine with a professional interest. "A bit of lip salve, a bit of rouge, that's the ticket."

And before Catherine could protest they steered her to Rose's dressing table. Rose carefully applied salve to her lips, and they carefully applied high color to her cheeks.

When Catherine gazed at herself in the mirror again, she dared not breathe. An exotic painted creature with darkly lashed huge blue eyes, pink cheeks, and violently red lips stared seductively back at her.

As their little party was announced, all heads turned to the top of the stairs. Catherine tried to ignore the sensation they had caused and that her employer was obviously reveling in... until her eyes caught and held one familiar face high above the crowd. He had been watching her, she thought in deep despair, and there was no doubt in her mind as to his thoughts. The contemptuous disdain in his gray eyes was readable even from across the room.

The marquis, whatever he thought of Catherine, was primarily concerned with his work. He surreptitiously pointed out one man to Jenkins:

"There's Beaumont. He suspects everything, but can do nothing. We're at peace now—but if the scales tip, I would be first on his list."

"Whose field does he play in now?" Jenkins asked.

"Ah, now that," the marquis said, "is a neat question. Our friend Beaumont is an excellent weather vane. Whatever the fate of France is to be, be sure that Beaumont will know it a half hour before the king himself. I have been watching him all evening."

"Oh?" said Jenkins. "I notice you haven't taken your eyes off the duchess's newest doxy all night. Is it that you think she holds the secrets of the succession behind those lovely blue eyes?"

The marquis seemed taken aback for a moment and then drawled in the offhand languid manner Jenkins knew so well, "Miss Prunes and Prisms has arrived in Paris and finally shows her true colors. She's obviously been after big game all the while. And I'm just curious to see to whom she attaches herself."

Jenkins glanced around the room before saying dryly, "The last I saw of her, she was trying to blend in with the furniture."

"She's only waiting for her opportunity; Jenkins. She's after more than her weak sisters-in-trade."

"You are too harsh with her." Jenkins sighed, shaking his head. "Why don't you just meet her price and then you will be able to forget about her and get on with it."

The marquis went back to watching the dancers.

He was not the only one. Herve Richard, who had been a man of substance and power when Bonaparte had led this land, was jealously watching his brother Pierre, who had been a beggar then and who was now a rich man deep in

the Bourbons' confidences.

Pierre, as stout and overfed as his beloved friend Louis Bourbon, was dancing with Catherine Robins. The girl seemed to be in an agony of discomfort. Was she never done with playacting? the marquis thought violently.

As the marquis watched, Beaumont, as neatly clad and unexceptional a little man as ever, came up to Herve's side and began whispering to him. So Beaumont had some interest in the little playlet as well?

The marquis watched Catherine dip and sway in Pierre Richard's arms. Her figure was exquisite and her face entrancing, even under all the paint. Jenkins was right. Though she might be nothing more than a cyprian, he did desire her. And his fascination with her was getting in the way of his mission here. He must have her and be done with it.

He would have to be sure he left her with pleasant memories so that she would be willing to cooperate with him.

For he could neither gather information nor observe dispassionately when she was about. For instance, he thought angrily, he should not be watching her dance with Pierre Richard and be as consumed with futile jealousy as Herve Richard so evidently was. He should rather be at Herve's side now, listening to his spiteful rage, as Beaumont was. For when a man was consumed by passion, he was often indiscreet, and when a man like Herve Richard was being indiscreet, there was a chance that there would be a great deal to learn. No; his fascination with her

was surely handicapping him. He grew angry with himself; and, indirectly, at her.

The dance finally ended, and while Pierre executed a courtly bow, Catherine took the opportunity to dip a sketchy curtsey and begin a hasty retreat to the safety of the wall where she had been standing before the weighty Frenchman had sought her out. But before she could return across the floor, she was intercepted by Herve.

The marquis's interest grew. It was true, as he had told Jenkins, that one might learn a great deal from merely watching clever demireps. For they seemed to gravitate to money and power as surely as any compass could show the North Star.

When the dance ended at last, the marquis wandered off in the direction that he had seen the girl disappear. An association with her, he thought, however brief, would be of some real value after all. For his own personal interest now seemed to dovetail with his professional interest. He would have to be sure that he left her with pleasant memories so that she would be willing to cooperate with him. And he would have yet another partner in his inquiries.

He found her alone in the library.

"What a problem," he sighed softly, entering the room and closing the door securely behind him. "Pierre has the ear of Louis, and the purse and privilege as well. Yet again, as you surely must have heard, there are all sorts of rumors flying. And it is altogether possible that after one month of bliss with Pierre, you might find that Herve was the one in power after all. His empérör is away just at the moment, but one never knows, does one?"

Her eyes, he noted with amazement, were filled with tears, and she wore an expression of grave despair. Had Herve threatened her?

"I want nothing to do with either one of them," she whispered. "I just want to be let alone till I can get home." Tears began to run down her cheeks. He took out a handkerchief and dabbed at them.

"No, no," he said tenderly, pushing back some stray tendrils of hair from her face. "Whatever can be dreadful enough to make you weep? It cannot be so terrible, can it? For here you are in the heart of society and you are so greatly sought after. Come, come, tell me what is the matter. It may be that I can help you. For I have come to help you, you know."

He felt her warm and vital, close against him, and he held her close, whispering all the while.

She drew away, looking ashamed. "I did not want to be a social success," she said. "But then that fat Frenchman made me dance with him. And he...he made me the most dreadful offer. And no sooner had I gotten away from him when the other took me up." For a moment, she smiled weakly, "I thought that it was him again, but it turned out to be his brother, saying the same things."

"What sort of things did he say?" asked the marquis, with a gleam of interest in his eyes.

"Promising me all sorts of things," she said, waving her hand in dismissal. "Carriages and gowns and jewels." She closed her eyes and shuddered. "And no matter what I said to both of them, they seemed deaf to my every word, and only assured me that they were in earnest, and that they could deliver everything they promised."

"They both promised great riches?" the marquis asked, a look of great alertness on his face.

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently. Then, seeing the abstracted look in his eyes, she said shamefacedly, "I am sorry to have gotten so familiar with you, Your Lordship, and I thank you for trying to set me

right again. I feel a headache coming on."

"No, no," the marquis objected, capturing her hands and smiling down at her. "Let's have none of that. You owe me no thanks, for I have not done anything for you as yet. Tell me, Catherine, what is it you want of this journey that neither Pierre nor Herve can give you?"

"I want to go home," she blurted. "That is all."

"Then why do you stay?" he asked in a low voice.

"I must wait until mid-March at least," she said gravely, "for the duchess pays me quarterly. And only then will I have the fare to go home."

The marquis stiffened imperceptibly, and then he laughed low in his throat. Ah, the little fix, he thought maliciously, it is money, after all.

"Well then," he said, the lines of cynicism deep in his smiling face, "that is easy enough to remedy. For I have enough in my pocket at this moment to see you home."

"Oh no." She shook her head. They were standing so close to each other that he could feel the ends of her curls tickle his cheek. "I could not borrow from you, Your Lordship, for I don't know when I could pay you back. I can wait until March, truly I can. It is just that it is good to have someone I can talk to. Someone who understands."

"Why, there is no need for paying me back, little Catherine," he said gruffly, again wishing she would stop this game.

"Little Catherine," he said, raising her with his hand and looking straight into her enormous eyes, "you would earn the lot. And seeing her eyes grow wider, he said quickly, "Believe me, little one, I promise not to make it a hardship. And I am generous. Although I usually prefer relationships that are open at both ends and can turn, both parties willing, into

long-standing ones, even conceivably a carte blanche, I am pressed for time just now. So I shall settle as much upon you for a few days of pleasure as I usually do for a few months. And though I do not pride myself on being the answer to every maiden's prayers, I know I can satisfy you on that score in a far more congenial manner than either of the Richards. You will find it more than pleasant, little one, I assure you. I have wanted you for a long time, and I know that you have not been unaware of me. So let's have an end to dickering. I will pay you . . ." he paused for just an instant, and then named a sum that was, he knew, more than generous. In fact, it was a good deal more than the figure he had formed in his head when he opened his mouth to speak but he was unsettled by the strange quietness in the room. "And I promise you will not have to exert yourself in any . . . unusual ways, to earn it. Now, it grows late. Come, we'll go back to my rooms, and you will see for yourself how pleasant it will be."

It was just another evening to her; fending off indecent proposals was all in a night's work.

He drew her closer, bent his head, and kissed her lightly, and then, as he lost himself in the deepening kiss, he became aware of pain. For she was tugging sharply at his hair.

He released her abruptly. She was staring at him in horror.

"How could you?" she shrilled. "You are as bad as those others. No, worse," she cried, pulling free of him and rushing to the door, "for you said you understood. And I trusted you."

"But what is it that you want?" he asked, standing alone and confused.

"I want to go home," she sobbed, and ran out the door.

The marquis did not go after her. He simply stood and stared after her, and then aimed a fierce kick at a chair, sending it flying.

Over the next couple of weeks, the marquis was too busy to rectify his mistake, if he admitted it as such. He was beginning to glean information.

"I think," he told Jenkins, at last, "that our mission is at an end. I think we can leave at any moment. Keep our gear in readiness. We have the names of those at the Tuileries who are supposed to be supporting Louis, but who will stab him in the back if they have a chance. And those who plot for Bonaparte's resurgence."

"A few of Beaumont's lads have been watching this hotel," Jenkins said calmly.

The marquis strode to the door. "One last party, old friend," he said, "and then we'll be gone. Beaumont shouldn't at all mind finding us in his net, if the tide turns his way. I only hope those other poor devils we'll be dining with have as much sense."

"True," mused Jenkins, following him. "It's hard to think of the old duchess rotting away in the Bastille."

The marquis smiled a cold hard smile that made Jenkins grimace.

"The old woman is so far gone, I doubt she'd know the difference. As to her camp followers—since that, I think, is what you were referring to—they follow a trade that can be plied under any change of government. I offered the girl a soft berth, and she turned me down. She's after a seat nearer the throne."

Catherine had no such hope that it would be her last party. It was just another evening to her, of the sort she had

grown used to, and fending off indecent proposals was in a night's work. So when M. Beaumont came and sat next to her, he was just another man.

"Mademoiselle Catherine," he said, "how delightful it is to find you alone, and on the very night that I wished to have private conversation with you. It has caused much talk among us. Why should the sweetest of them all withhold herself? they are saying. Why? I myself have wondered."

Catherine began to speak, but he cut her off with a wave of his hand.

"No, the thing is clear to me. You seek something more lucrative, more permanent, with more advantages. I understand you well."

"Indeed, you do not," Catherine flared, rising.

M. Beaumont put his hand upon her arm and forced her to sit again. "I am a man of some small influence, Miss Catherine," he said with a smile. "I would advise you to stay and listen to me."

Catherine quieted, and he took his hand from her arm.

"Much better," he smiled. "I do not like to insist upon my way unless I have to. This is what I have come to say. Give up your ties with the duchess. She has served her purpose—you will get no more from her. Come with me; I shall steer a clear course for you to the rewards you have been seeking. I shall find you a comfortable arrangement before the week is out."

"You are wrong," Catherine whispered. "I shall not leave the duchess."

"I have spoken with the duchess," said Beaumont, "and she is quite willing to end her association with you. I have taken over your fate. Just have your bags packed by tomorrow morning and all will end more pleasantly than you ever hoped."

"Where do you propose to take me?"

"To my dear friend Herve, of course."

"Never," Catherine said, rising again.

"I have no time for playacting; the decision has been made without your consent. It is over, Miss Catherine," he said, rising with her and gripping her wrist till it ached. "My man will see you to your hotel. And my man will take you to M. Richard tomorrow evening. Do not try to evade my orders. No good will come of it."

Catherine went to plead with the duchess for help. But the older woman was clearly in terror of Beaumont.

What was Catherine to do? She could not turn to the marquis, although she was sure that he could stand against M. Beaumont. But to go to him would be to say she was his. Why should he believe otherwise? And Catherine knew that if she went to him, she somehow would become his. She had her wages from the duchess now, but M. Beaumont would never let her go.

She encountered Rose, and sobbed out her predicament.

"You do have a problem, Catherine," Rose said, "and I have got to be right out with you, dear. The easiest thing for you to do would be to go with Beaumont. Herve Richard ain't a bad sort."

Catherine recoiled in horror.

"No," Rose sighed, "I didn't truly think so. Ah, Catherine, forgive me. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. It was just an idea, you know. Forget I said it, do. For I know you're a good girl, and I wasn't thinking straight. We have just to get you away from here without Beaumont twigging to it, and all will be well. How to do it is the question. We'll ask Vi. She's a wonder at getting herself out of tight corners. I'll just go get her."

"You want to skip out, then?" Violet asked when she had heard the tale. "All

right, then. Just pack those things you find necessary, and only a few things at that. Here, wait a tick," she said, suddenly galvanized, and she leaped up and ran lightly to her room.

She returned in a few moments. "Here," she said, placing a worn portmanteau at Catherine's feet. "I always carry it in case I have to skip fast. It's old and battered, but it won't attract attention."

Rose asked, "Catherine, let me see your purse."

Dutifully, Catherine handed it over to her.

"Oh, this will never do," Rose cried. She added a fistful of coins over Catherine's protests. "No, no," Rose said adamantly. "We're friends, aren't we?"

To refuse Rose's money, Catherine realized, would be to deny her friendship.

"So we are Rose," she whispered, "and I am grateful. Someday I hope to pay you back."

Catherine and Violet said their farewells, and Rose took her down to James, the coachman, who agreed to help. The three of them considered various disguises, but none were convincing enough. At last they hit on garbing her in a loose tattered jacket and pantaloons, putting a big hat on her head and smearing her with dirt, and sending her off as a half-witted boy. To disguise her girl's voice and her lack of French, they gave her a note, purportedly from the boy's parents, saying he was a mute idiot going to stay with his grandparents in Dieppe.

James found a pair of old boots, but they were much too small. She forced her foot into the left one anyway, stifling a cry of pain. She reached down for the right boot, but James stayed her hand.

"Where's the blunt you've got?" he asked.

"In my portmanteau," she answered,

puzzled.

"Get it out, Rosie," he said.

Rose handed Catherine's purse to him with a questioning look.

He spilled the coins into his hand.

"Here," he said, wrapping them in a square handkerchief he pulled from his pocket. "There's pickpockets and thieves. You use the poor man's safe, Catherine, and you'll be right and tight. Stow it in your boot."

"But there's hardly room for her foot," Rose protested.

"Then she can swim to England," James thundered, "for if someone lifts her good British gold, she's a beggar."

She felt more herself in dirty borrowed clothes than she had during all the nights in her new finery.

When they forced the coins and her foot into the boot, she had to limp.

"All to the good," James commented. "It completes the picture."

"Rose," Catherine said, clasping the other woman's hand, "I do not know if we will meet again. But I shall never forget you."

Rose clasped Catherine to her and hugged her tightly.

Even though her right foot felt like it trod upon a fiery cobble every time she took a step, Catherine kept pace with James. In her disguise, in dirty borrowed clothes, she suddenly felt more herself than she had all the nights she had been gotten up in her new finery. That disguise had been more alien to her than this one.

James took her to an inn outside of Paris, where she was to board a coach for

Dieppe. But the coach had been delayed, and the inn was full. The only place for Catherine to sleep was on the brick fender of the taproom fireplace.

"Not the best accommodations," James shrugged, "but keep your hat on, curl up tight, use your carpetbag as a pillow and you'll be safe enough. There'll be a spot of dinner later. Then curl up and sleep. And then, after breakfast, board the coach and go. I don't care if you have to ride atop it, go."

James left her. She was on her own, at last.

The afternoon passed slowly. As night came, it grew colder, and soon the landlady huffed into the taproom and brushed at Catherine.

"*Allez, allez,*" she roared, as people do at those they think are lacking in wit. "*J'ai besoin d'allumer le feu.*"

Catherine stepped back from the bricks and let the landlady touch a match to the tinder. Soon a comfortable fire war roaring, and the landlady waved at Catherine again.

"*Asseyez-vous. Asseyez-vous,*" she commanded, and Catherine sat back down again as requested.

The taproom slowly filled, and a few kitchen maids brought bowls of stew, tankards of beer, and bottles of wine out to the guests. One stopped and placed a bowl of stew and a glass of cider on the bricks at Catherine's side. She smiled at the poor waif, and Catherine ducked her head and began to eat, badly frightened because she had almost said "thank you" without thinking.

The heat and a full stomach should have made Catherine drowsy enough to curl up to sleep. But the pain in her foot was sufficient to keep her sitting upright in distress. The warmth had made her feet swell and the boot was now like some medieval torture device.

Her suffering had become so acute that she did not take note of the altercation at the desk for some time. But finally the sound of raised voices reached her pain-deadened ears and she looked up. The landlady was shrieking at a troop of men who had straggled in. They were tough desperate-looking fellows, and Catherine shrunk into herself, looking at them.

They were traveling to Paris, they protested loudly. For they had heard that their emperor was returning. One great fat fellow was roaring that the emperor would be very displeased with a female who denied free room to his soldiers. The woman shouted back, equally loudly, that as far as she knew Louis still sat upon the throne and no one was going to take over her inn as housing for an army that didn't exist. Finally, to Catherine's horror, the landlady pointed to the fireplace and to Catherine.

"*Allez. Avec l'idiot,*" she said.

The troop of men made their way into the taproom. Catherine was afraid to budge, so she simply took her portmanteau, put it on her lap, and tried to look as insignificant as possible. The fat man who was their leader came over to her. He shouted down at her. She drew back, both from the violence in his voice and the dark heavy smell that emanated from him.

Then, to her horror, he reached down and lifted her by the shoulders and threw her aside. She stumbled against the edge of the fireplace.

"*Je dors là,*" he grunted, and, sitting where she had been, he took her portmanteau and began to open it.

Sheer despair caused her to launch herself soundlessly at him, clutching for her portmanteau in a frenzy. He waved her off with one large paw and kicked out at her. When his booted foot connected with her aching leg, she heard someone

howl in a high keening scream of pain, and only when she fell, cradling her leg, did she realize that it had been she herself who had made that terrible cry. Suddenly she heard an incredibly familiar voice say in French, "So this is how brave Frenchmen despise themselves."

Catherine, looking up from under the brim of her hat, saw the tall straight figure of the Marquis of Bessacarr striding into the room. Jenkins, she saw, was behind him.

"Now why does a grown man torment a child, do you think, Jenkins?" the marquis drawled.

The man who held Catherine's portmanteau put it down and slowly stood up. The marquis looked around him.

"And how long do you think it will be, once we are in our rooms, Jenkins, before they take extra good care of the poor lad? As I recall, there's a spacious hearth in my room as well. I'll let the lad spend the night there. For these oafs will tear him apart just to revenge themselves on me, if I do not protect him now."

"I still don't think it's a good idea," said Jenkins, genuinely appalled. "There has to be another way. The idiot lad is bound to be flea-ridden, or worse."

"I didn't say I would put him up in my bed," the marquis said coolly. "I said my hearth."

Jenkins once again shook his head in demurral, and Catherine stood still and mute, and watched as the marquis turned away from his valet and explained the plan to the landlady. She beamed at him in approval of his Christian charity, and then hastened over to Catherine.

"*Allez*," she shouted in Catherine's ear, "*avec le gentilhomme. Allez. Allez.*" she screeched again, as Catherine stood rooted to the spot.

Finally, trembling with fear, Catherine turned to follow the marquis and his valet

in the direction that the landlady was pointing.

Still, all was not lost. She noted that the marquis did not look at her again. He immediately turned and went to the stairs and began to ascend. Jenkins turned once and shook his head in disapproval. But the men in the room were still grumbling to themselves, and Catherine realized that whatever was in store for her, she would be safer away from them.

As she mounted the stairs behind the marquis and Jenkins, she realized that neither of them had seen through her masquerade, and that the light was dim, and she would be expected only to curl up and sleep by a hearth. And she could be gone by early light. Safe from the marquis and from the brutes below stairs.

When they reached the marquis's room, Catherine put down her portmanteau and, gathering herself up in a small heap, lay down upon the stone hearth with her bag as her pillow.

After she was sure the marquis was asleep, Catherine sat up. Her leg ached with a steady throb that began to encompass her whole body. Whatever James had said, she knew she must get her boot off.

The sound came to Sinjun's ears immediately and his face twisted into a disgusted grimace. He raised himself slightly and looked over toward the boy. The fool was sitting up, slightly hunched over, and the sound of his rhythmic panting was clearly audible.

Sinjun raised his long body from the bed and padded slowly on light feet to see what the devil was going on. He observed the poor fool struggling to get his shabby boot off.

"Here," he said gruffly in the local argot, "let me do it."

He had expected the boy to be surprised, but not to the extent that he was. For

he jerked up to a sitting position and cowered away.

"It looks as though you've finally gotten her where you wanted her, lad. In your bed."

"Come," Sinjun demanded in the same dialect, "I will help you. Do not be afraid."

And without waiting any longer, he reached down to grasp the boy's boot. As he gave it a twist and the final tug to free it, three things happened almost simultaneously.

The boot, freed from its grip on the boy's foot, came off in his hand. A small packet flew from it and landed on the floor with a damp thud beside him. And the boy cried out in English in a high, clear woman's voice. "No. Do not touch me. Please, don't."

And then as he stood dumbfounded, the boy fainted away.

Sinjun gathered the boy in his arms and carried the insubstantial weight to his bed. He gently removed the ridiculous hat and stared long at the still white face, genuinely staggered at the sight of the unconscious form.

"Well," said Jenkins slowly from behind him, as he sheathed his knife carefully, "it looks as though you've finally gotten her where you wanted her, lad. In your bed."

For once the marquis did not return Jenkins' sally with another. He only stood and watched the closed face beneath his.

Catherine told her story when she recovered consciousness. The marquis stared at her incredulously. Finally, he

spoke.

"Do you mean to tell us that you actually believed you were to be no more than a companion for the duchess?"

She shrank back from the force of his voice, but then found herself growing angry at the tenor of his words.

"How should I have thought otherwise?" she argued, "for she was a duchess and she seemed to live at the height of respectability. Women such as the duchess may be common coin in your set, Your Lordship, but I assure you we have none such in Kendal. Why, if any woman behaved so, her relatives would have her clapped up somewhere to protect her from herself."

Sinjun ran a hand through his hair while Catherine could hear Jenkins' low chortling. But then the marquis turned again and said with a certain slyness, Catherine thought. "And yet, even you must have realized what her game was by the time we met upon the packet to France. For both Rose and Violet were in the duchess's trail then."

"No," Catherine admitted in a little voice, hanging her head, "by then I did know."

"Then, in the fiend's name, why didn't you just hie yourself home to Kendal?"

"I hadn't the funds," Catherine answered softly.

"Why didn't you appeal to someone you knew? Me, for instance?"

"I tried to," she said. "But . . ." she flushed. And the marquis, remembering, for once was speechless. He only gave a low muttered curse and walked to the fire to stare at its dying embers.

Jenkins attended to her foot.

"Stay in the bed," the marquis said. "I'll retire to Jenkins' room. We have to be off by first light."

"You may be off wherever you choose," Catherine said sleepily. "I shall

wake early and go from here and bother you no more."

"Don't be absurd," he snapped. "As a woman traveling alone you'll never get past the front door of the inn by yourself."

"But I shan't be a woman traveling alone," she reminded him, smiling. "I shall be a poor, zany, mute French beggar of the male sex."

"In the night, you might have gotten away with it for a few hours," he said sternly, "but never in the day." He cut off the next objection she was about to make by saying swiftly and accurately, "I beg you to remember what might have befallen you if we had not interceded with that pack of mercenary curs below stairs this evening. So you shall travel with us, unless you really do desire Pierre Richard's fevered embrace and are only trying to up your price by being a little inaccessible when M. Beaumont comes to call."

"I shall not travel with you," Catherine whispered fiercely. "And, at any rate, it is not Pierre Richard, it is Herve, that M. Beaumont intended me for. And I would rather face a horde such as I met this evening than—"

But she could say nothing further, for the marquis had taken her shoulders and gripped them hard. "Herve?" he said fiercely. "Are you sure he said it was to be Herve?"

"Yes," she answered fearfully.

"Then we shall awake before first light," the marquis said grimly, releasing her and turning to go. But before he left her to that sleep which exhaustion was drawing her to, swiftly and against her will, like water flowing down an open drain, he said harshly, "And if I discover that you have taken one step from this room without my knowledge, you will wish that we had left you to the mercies of

those misbegotten wretches below. You will pray for Beaumont to come and save you. I swear it."

With that, he left, and closed the door behind him.

"Lock it," he said from the hallway outside.

While Catherine latched the door with the last effort of her aching muscles and closed her mind to the thousand questions that assailed it, the marquis was across the hall, ordering Jenkins back from the bed out of which he had risen.

"I'll take the floor," he said savagely. "I feel the need of some penance: So it's Herve! There's a turn. Bonaparte must be closer than we had thought. For if Beaumont is beginning to shower Herve with gifts, it's certain that his little corporal has quit his island empire and is on his way."

"Aye" Jenkins agreed. "And he'll be like a hound on the lass's traces if he's already promised her to Herve."

The sense of contentment in the marquis' company was so overwhelming that she could not imagine a place where she would rather be.

They decided, in the morning, that Catherine would continue as a woman, in a dress Jenkins procured from one of the maids. The two men disguised themselves as French peasants also, and they purchased a tired old nag for Catherine to ride. They rode through a chill, rainy French countryside, and as evening fell took shelter in an abandoned farm house.

After a welcome dinner of cheese and bread that Jenkins had foraged earlier,

and after warming herself thoroughly by the fire, Catherine stretched and began to take lively note of their surroundings again.

The marquis sat at ease across from her on a box he had found in the barn, and Jenkins sat cross-legged on the floor, gazing into the fire.

"I suppose," Catherine said conversationally, "that it won't be too long before we reach Dieppe, will it, Your Lordship?"

"Oh, Catherine," the marquis answered. "Have done with 'Your Lordship.' Say it in a crowd of Frenchmen, and I might lose my head."

"But it will be more than long before we reach Dieppe. It will be never. Too many people knew you were bound for Dieppe, and it will be the logical place for Beaumont to pick up your trail. No, we will journey to Le Havre. And we shall not find ourselves berths upon a tourist packet for we will be snugly accommodated on some smuggler's vessel."

They retired, but Catherine did not fall asleep right away. Sinjun lay not far from her on the other side of the fireplace, and Jenkins, nearer to the door, breathing heavily.

She was warm and full and the two men in the room gave her a feeling of comfort and security such as she had not known in many weeks. The sense of contentment and pleasure in the marquis' company was so overwhelming that, try as she might, she could not imagine a place where she would rather be. And yet she felt that if he but knew her deep contentment, he would be somehow displeased. He would be, she thought further, convinced that she was no better than a light woman. For what decently reared girl would be so pleased in such bizarre, irregular circumstances?

"Catherine," came a low whisper in the dark, "do go to sleep. For we must travel hard in the morning. We go a roundabout route."

"How did you know I was not sleeping?" she whispered back.

"I could hear you thinking," Sinjun said with a low chuckle. "And I could not hear you snore."

"I do not snore," Catherine said with a giggle, thinking once again, as she had all evening, how the marquis seemed to have put off his cold, cynical manner at the same time that he had put off his immaculate garments.

"Nonsense," he chuckled. "Hear old Jenkins over there? You outdo him by half. I'll wager between the two of you that I won't get a moment's undisturbed rest this night."

She snorted, an unladylike but companionable snort.

"Catherine," the marquis said after a pause, "do not worry. We shall see you safely home again."

They continued their rugged journey the next morning. The weather was against them. First rain, then cold to freeze it where it lay, then wind and more rain slowed their forward movement. Coaches, private and hired, passed them on the roads. It was as the marquis had predicted: The English were beginning to go home again.

Rumor was everywhere, and while the farrier in one town would insist that they were at war with the pigs of England again, the one in another town would steadfastly maintain that Louis still held sway.

One day they had to sit and wait out the weather in the shelter of a disused barn. They passed the time telling stories, speculating on the fate of those they had known in Paris. When, at noon, Jenkins produced an old, limp deck of cards, they

cheered as though they had been given the rarest treat.

They traveled together for five cold, unpleasant days. Their food was rough, their beds usually straw or their own folded garments, yet Catherine could never remember being happier.

And the cause of her happiness, she had thought on the fifth day, rode alongside her. They had been constantly together throughout the journey. Each night they had chatted happily in the dark till sleep overtook them. He had been a courteous and charming companion, and every last vestige of the cool autocrat she had envisioned him was gone. And, above all, never once since they had begun their trek had he looked at her with the salacious, burning looks he had used when they met in society.

The only discomfort Catherine had felt beyond the physical on their journey toward home was the discomfort of knowing that if he knew her feelings—worse, if she displayed them—he would think her to be the easy female he had originally thought her.

The next day the sky cleared and they continued.

"We're allowing ourselves a treat today," Sinjun said as he rode beside her. "We are on the outskirts of Le Havre, and since we have heard no bells tolling or cannon fire, I think we can safely assume the throne lies secure still. So we will stop at an inn. Then we can find a vessel in the morning."

"And," Jenkins stressed, "we must go out, His Lordship and I, to nose out the land. We'll be convivial in the taproom, Catherine, whilst you launder your hair, and find out what's to know."

The inn they chose heartened her. It was clean and in far better repair than the last one in Saint-Denis.

Catherine stripped off her peasant

dress and washed herself from top to toe. She put on a clean dress and sat down to wait for the men.

Sinjun returned in the late afternoon. "You'd best stay in your room this evening," he said. "Jenkins and I will scout the tenor of things. Besides, there is talk of a reward offered for the apprehension of some vile Englishwoman who stole a fortune from her employer, a certain English lady. And the word is that the miscreant is most probably headed for the coast. M. Beaumont is a desperate character and dislikes having his will crossed. So stay safe inside, my little French 'wife,' and no harm will befall you."

"Sinjun?" Catherine asked softly.

"Yes?" he answered, his hand already on the knob of the door.

"Will you come back tonight and let me know what you have discovered?"

"Of course," he agreed.

He sat close to her and ran his hand gently across her hair.

"I have tried hard to be brotherly, Catherine..."

Jenkins brought her a tray a short while later.

"Best if the maids stay far from this room altogether," he said, putting it down for her. "When you're done, put the empty plates outside."

Catherine did not like the sudden inactivity. She was restless and impatient, itching to be off and doing rather than to be just a passive creature awaiting whatever fate had in store. That, she thought, was a gentleman's main advantage in life.

Women like Rose and Violet were able to go out and face life and try to turn it to their advantage, but a properly brought-up female could not. Perhaps, it was that, Catherine thought moodily, that turned them to such occupation in the first place, rather than inherent lechery. Whatever else this trip provided, she concluded at last, it was certain that the Catherine Robins who returned to Kendal would never be the same who had left it.

"Catherine," Sinjun's voice called in low, conspiratorial tones.

She was glad to ease the door open to admit him.

"All the lads are planning how high to hang old Louis. Some are even talking of how to spend their prize money when they take over London."

"And what is said of the English woman?"

"Oh, as to that," Sinjun said airily, "there's no description of her hereabouts save that she is traveling in the company of two English gentlemen."

Catherine gasped.

Sinjun grinned again.

"It seems that you disappeared from Paris the same day Jenkins and I did. So Beaumont has reasoned, and one can't blame him for it, that I ran off with you just to tweak his nose. However, we are three sturdy citizens of the Republic. So there's nothing to fear. But it is far past midnight. Why aren't you in bed?"

Catherine told him she would go to bed as soon as he left her room.

"Now that," Sinjun said, sinking down to sit beside her, "truly wounds me, Catherine, it does. For we have shared our rooms for so long and you never were so punctilious before. I only came to tuck you in tightly, as a good brother should. And I have been a good brother to you, haven't I?"

He sat close to her and ran his hand

gently across her hair, seeming to become engrossed in the texture of it.

"I have tried very hard to be brotherly, Catherine, and I have been extremely circumspect. And the wonder of it is that all these months I had thought you so available, and when at last I had you to myself, I treated you with perfect courtesy. And it has been hard, Catherine, very hard to do so. Now don't you think I deserve a reward for being such a paragon?"

He kissed her, gently and sweetly, and she was surprised at the eagerness with which she involuntarily returned his kiss.

He moved his lips to her cheek, to her throat, and then gathered her still closer with a groan.

"Catherine," he whispered against her hair, "you are lovely."

His hands drifted from her back and moved to begin to trace the outlines of her breasts and waist. His kisses became more profound, his mouth as warm and rich and fragrant as the wine she tasted upon it. But these were not the sweet light movements that had so enticed her. He now seemed to be setting something urgent into motion, something that she could not control or know how to respond to. So she began to try to pull away from him, to force his searching mouth from hers.

"Catherine," he breathed as his hands became more insistent, "no more pretense. I know what will please you."

But now all thoughts of pleasure were gone from Catherine's mind. In their place was panic and the realization of what he thought her willing to do with him. She struggled to be free from him, crying out, "Please, Sinjun. No. No more."

He released her immediately when she spoke and sat confused.

"No, Sinjun," she cowered, fearful of the changed expression in his smoky eyes,

fearful of her own reaction to him.

"I don't understand," he said slowly. "Why are you so afraid, Catherine? You've never been so afraid of me before."

"It's only that I startled her," Jenkins said, coming up from behind Sinjun. He seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

"I've something important to tell Your Lordship," Jenkins said, propelling Sinjun from the room with him. "Lock your door, Catherine, and go to sleep. His Lordship and I have something to discuss."

Catherine collected herself and rushed to her door, not to lock it, but to see what Jenkins and Sinjun were about to do. But instead of leading the marquis back to his room, Jenkins, still talking softly and rapidly, led him down the stairs. From the top of the stairs Catherine could see them going to the front of the inn.

Catherine was trembling with the force of her emotions. She had welcomed his embrace—she could not deceive herself as to that. And she had pulled away from him not only because of her fear of the unknown, but because of her horror at having let him see what her innermost emotions toward him had been. Now, she told herself dumbly, he will think me no better than he always thought me.

After a long while she heard Sinjun and Jenkins return. When they neared her door, Catherine's eyes widened. Sinjun was drenched. His hair was plastered to his head, and his clothes were dripping water. She thought she could perceive a slow shudder race across his wide shoulders. He turned to her and bowed before he passed her door.

"My apologies," he said stiffly. "I bid you good night, Catherine."

"Lock your door now, Miss Catherine," Jenkins said sternly. "There'll be no further disturbances

tonight."

"But," Catherine whispered, "what befell Sinjun? Was there trouble with footpads?"

"No, no," Jenkins said soothingly, "no trouble at all. His Lordship only decided to go for a midnight dip. Just a moonlight swim."

"But it is freezing outside," Catherine said in horror. "He'll be ill. He'll take a chill."

"No, no," Jenkins demurred. "He needed a chill was what it was."

Jenkins bowed correctly and then waited till Catherine had closed her door and locked it.

She heard an eerily familiar voice behind her.

*"Good evening, Miss Robins,"
Henri Beaumont said silkily.*

Sinjun towed himself dry in silence as Jenkins climbed into his bed.

"I made a cake out of myself, didn't I?" he asked.

"Yes," Jenkins answered.

"Well, blast it," Sinjun shouted, throwing the towel across the room, "it was the wine. And the last vague hope that I was right and she was just another cozening fancy piece."

"And the fact that she said no changed Your Lordship's powerful mind?" Jenkins growled.

"And the fact that she wouldn't have known what to do if she said yes," Sinjun admitted.

Sinjun came into Catherine's room at first light. He was stiffly correct and unsmiling, and apologized sincerely for his actions of the previous night. His very

correctness toward her froze Catherine. For she read disdain and revulsion in his every word and gesture. And so she meekly accepted his apology and thanked him for it.

Sinjun and Jenkins went out to book passage to England, and Catherine went down to breakfast. As she sipped her chocolate, she heard an eerily familiar voice behind her.

"Good evening, Miss Robins," Henri Beaumont said silkily. "It is a great pleasure to find you here."

Henri Beaumont pulled out a chair and sat smiling benignly at Catherine. He noted the shock in the girl's eyes and the distress which had sent the color flying from her cheeks.

He did not blame her. The English marquis was a better example of manhood than his poor friend Herve. After all, she was a woman as well as a businesswoman.

"So," he said, placing his hands upon the table, "now you will come with me, Miss Robins."

"No," Catherine said, "I am an English citizen and I am free to go home if I wish."

"This is so very tiresome," he said. He stood and motioned to two of the soldiers who had entered the inn with him. "Please stand and go with them quietly, Miss Catherine, for it will be no use for you to make a to-do."

Catherine rose and began to walk with the two soldiers. As they approached the door she saw Sinjun and Jenkins enter.

"M. Beaumont," Sinjun bowed; "how unexpected to meet you again."

"Not entirely unexpected, Your Lordship," M. Beaumont smiled, returning the bow. "For surely a gentleman such as yourself would have patronized finer establishments than stables and barns on his journey if he had not been at least half-

way expecting to see me again?"

Sinjun acknowledged the words with a tight smile.

M. Beaumont said, "I must deprive her of your company. She is lovely, but she is also a thief. See what I have discovered she had upon her person when I apprehended her."

He dug into his pocket and help up a chamois purse. Lovingly, he withdrew a strand of pearls. As Catherine gaped, he took an emerald and diamond brooch from its folds and, lastly, held up the duchess's finest sapphire and ruby pendant.

"And not only that," he said sadly, "but I have also the lady who owns these trinkets to testify as to their theft."

As Catherine watched in horror, M. Beaumont's man entered with the Duchess of Crewe following him. No trace of her former dignity showed, and when she spoke, it was not with command, but with a cranky querulousness.

"Yes. Those are my jewels," she said immediately upon entering, never once looking at what M. Beaumont held up in his hand. "And that's the gel. You said I could go home now."

"Certainly," M. Beaumont said. "Now that you have spoken in front of witnesses, you may go."

The dowager hastily and ungracefully made for the door.

"So you see," M. Beaumont said helplessly, spreading out his hands. "I have no choice. I shall keep Miss Robins here securely for a day or two. Then we shall return to Paris and justice. But," he said slyly, "you may visit her in her incarceration if you wish, my Lord. I am not a heartless man, after all."

"And I would imagine that you hope I shall visit often, often enough to make time pass and the tables turn?" Sinjun snapped.

"Oh, well, as to that," Beaumont shrugged. "Time has a way of passing in just such ways, does it not?"

"Time enough, one might say, for certain news to come from Paris?"

"We both await such news, Marquis," Beaumont said smoothly, "for even as we stand here talking, such news may be old in Paris. But, alas, there is no glass to see so far nor any voice to carry."

"And," Sinjun said carefully, "there is even a chance that such great events might miscarry, is there not? For otherwise, I think, you would not be so content to let me go."

"All things are possible," Beaumont said, "You are free, of course, M. Marquis. But the moment you become Citizen Marquis I shall know of it."

Catherine was taken to jail, and as she sat in her cell, she felt utter hopelessness. Sinjun was gone—he must certainly have fled to England already. She wondered how long he would remember her after they were safe in England again. At last her control snapped and the tears began to flow.

Now, almost wildly, she regretted her reactions of the night before. For if she had let him make love to her, it might have been a thing that could sustain her in the strange new life that lay ahead of her.

And when Sinjun saw her, crumpled in a corner and weeping soundlessly, he tightened his knuckles till they were white on the bars of her cell.

She saw him and came running to the bars.

"Oh, no, Sinjun, you must not stay here," she cried out wildly, "for that is M. Beaumont's plan, to delay you till it is too late. You must go," she said frantically, her tearstained face striking him to the heart.

"Hush, Catherine," he said sternly.

"Quiet. I must speak and you must listen. There is a way to get you safe from here. But you must agree and agree at once."

Sinjun smiled. "You have no authority to arrest my wife, the Marchioness of Bessacarr."

She nodded, clutching his hand tightly.

"You must marry me," he said.

He saw her disbelief and lowered his voice and said firmly, "Beaumont cannot keep you here if you are a peeress of the realm. Marry me, Catherine, and we can leave at first light and go home, home to England again. I have Jenkins here. And a minister. We can be wed here and now. And then you will be allowed to go free. I promise you if you do not agree, I will stay here. I cannot live with myself as a man if I abandon you."

He had to strain to hear her whispered reply:

"Yes, Sinjun. I will if you wish it."

And so in a basement in Le Havre, St. John Basil St. Charles, Marquis of Bessacarr, was wed to Catherine Emily Robins.

M. Beaumont's face was wreathed in smiles when he descended the steps to Catherine's cell in the morning. The marquis was still there, sitting on a bench. He had stayed the night and missed one voyage out to be with the girl. With luck, Beaumont thought, he could be maneuvered into staying another.

"Good morning, Beaumont," the marquis said briskly. "Now, if you please, release your prisoner."

M. Beaumont laughed.

"Ah, if it were only that easy to forget crime," he sighed happily.

"I'm afraid it must be," Sinjun smiled, "for you have no authority to arrest my wife, the Marchioness of Bessacarr. If you have any doubts upon that head, I beg you to look at these papers. And there is a very official note from our ambassador requesting that you immediately release my wife from your custody. You would not want to disrupt amicable Anglo-French relations, would you, Beaumont?"

So Catherine returned to England a marchioness, in name at least. But while Sinjun installed her at Fairleigh, his estate, he made no move to claim her as his wife.

After a few weeks, during which he was alternately friendly as a brother and puzzlingly distant, he suddenly left for London.

Catherine sought out Jenkins. "What am I to do, Jenkins?" she asked. "He married me only as an act of gallantry."

"I don't know," Jenkins mused. "I should think it would have been just as easy for him to get those papers mocked up. Any warm body would have done to pretend to be a minister. It seems to me that he made a highly permanent gesture of kindness when he didn't really have to."

Catherine sat still and blinked.

"But Sinjun's so honest," she finally managed to say, "why would he tell me it was the only way to free me if it was not?"

"Perhaps it was what he believed at the time. I've often found that a fellow believes what he wants to, deep down, when an emergency arises."

"No," Catherine said flatly, after some thought, "that cannot be. For he's never said a word to me about any tender feelings, not since we've come to Fairleigh. And," she said, a blush rising in her cheeks, "he's never made a gesture either. Oh, Jenkins, what does he want of me?"

"As to that, I couldn't say," Jenkins said mildly. But it seems to me, if you'll forgive the impertinence, My Lady, that you're the one that's got the only right to ask. Do you want to stay in this marriage?"

"Yes," Catherine said simply, hanging her head.

"I can't blame you," Jenkins commented. "A lovely home, fine clothes, no more worries about money. It's a soft berth, it is indeed."

"How could you!" Catherine said, suddenly blazing with anger. "You know me better than that, Jenkins. I wouldn't care if we had to live in a barn forever, as we did in France. It's Sinjun I love!"

"Love?" Jenkins asked, grinning when he saw her sudden dismay at the hastiness of her words. "Well, there's a horse of a different color. Love. And so then, you are sad because His Lordship rejects his wife's love? Ah now, that I can understand. But I can't understand him turning down such a lovely female."

"He hasn't," Catherine said guiltily, "because I haven't told him my true feelings. Jenkins, can't you see? If I do I just know what his reaction will be. He will feel sorry for me. I could not bear that."

"You could always leave if he offered you sympathy," Jenkins reasoned. "But the thing of it is, you don't really know what he'll offer. You've been a brave lass since I've known you, Miss Catherine, I wonder at you not being courageous enough to hear what his offer will be."

"I'm going to London," Catherine announced suddenly. "Oh Jenkins, help me to go now. If I think about it, I know I'll change my mind again."

"I'll ready the carriage," Jenkins said, moving quickly, "and tell your maid to pack like devils were after her sweet body. We can be there by nightfall if we hurry."

They were there even before the mar-

quis arrived for dinner. When he saw her, his face lit up, but as he approached her, it retreated to his habitual cool expression.

"Catherine," he said politely, "I am surprised to see you. Is there anything amiss? Jenkins said you felt you had to see me straightaway."

"No," she said quietly, with admirable control, "but I felt that I must speak with you, Sinjun, and I did not wish to put it off till you returned to Fairleigh."

"Very well," he said, standing before her, "here I am. What is it, my dear?"

"Sinjun, I must know, exactly why did you marry me?"

After a brief pause, his voice came coolly to her ears. "Catherine, you know that as well as I. Why did you marry me?"

"Don't answer my question with a question," she retorted, daring to look straight at him. "I came here to see you, to talk with you, for I do not think we can go on as we are."

She bent her head and railed at herself, for she did not have the courage to suddenly declare love to this watchful collected stranger.

"I know," he sighed. "It was a bad beginning and you should not bedevil yourself. I do understand. You shall have your freedom just as soon as it is lawfully possible. Who is the lucky fellow?"

She looked up at that, to find him looking at her from eyes that seemed to be narrowed and carved of marble.

A sense of outrage made her gasp, "What are you talking about? What fellow?"

"The one you have discovered you love and wish to make your true husband," he said with weary patience.

"There is no other I love," she blurted, "or could ever love. You are the only man upon this earth that I want for a husband."

The enormity of what she had said, the

way she had put the whole matter, plain and unadorned, caused her to stop and stare at him with an expression of horrified guilt.

"What did you say?" he asked, incredulously.

"Oh Sinjun," she almost wailed. "it is not how I wished to say it. I will not keep you tied to me, indeed I will not."

"Catherine, Catherine," he said, taking her in his arms, and holding her closely, "what are you talking about? Are you mad? Tie me to you for the rest of my life? Why, you have done that already. For I love you, and have done so for so long that I would feel empty without it. As I have done this past week."

"But you left me," she whispered, delighting in the warmth that flowed from him.

"Only so that I could save you from my attentions," he said, "for we have no millpond at Fairleigh to cool my ardors in. And I did not wish to force you to my desire, Catherine."

"Oh, that. But then, it was only because I did not wish you to think me like Rose and Violet," she admitted.

He laughed and she could feel the laughter deep in his chest where her hands lay.

"And so you came all the way to London to confess your love," he breathed. "Catherine, let us have done with pretense for all time. Will you be my wife because you love me, with no hope for escape in divorce, for I love you?"

"Oh yes, of course, Sinjun," she whispered, and then he drew her to him gently and kissed her for reply. She gave herself to his embrace and freed herself to give him back kiss for kiss and embrace for embrace.

But as his gentle hands and mouth threatened to drive all further rational thoughts from her, she placed her hands

against his chest again and gently pushed him from her.

"Sinjun," she said, catching her breath, "before we go on, there is something I must tell you. It is a thing Rose and Violet told me about marriage."

He straightened instantly and looked at her with dismay.

"I was afraid of that," he muttered to himself and spoke carefully. "Look, Catherine, you must not pay too much mind to what they told you of the ways of love. They are not respectable married females. And many of the things they have...encountered are not things to which a respectable woman is subjected. So you need not fear, for I will never do anything that I think will frighten or distress you. I will only try to bring you pleasure."

"That's just it," Catherine said. "One afternoon Rose and Violet were speaking of marriage. And they said that the reason they had many clients who were married

gentlemen was that so many of them treated their wives with nice notions of what is proper between a man and his wife. And further, they said that if a man would show his wife exactly what pleased him, as if she were a paid companion, they would probably be a great deal happier and the gentlemen would save their money, for then they wouldn't have to seek out special females for their pleasures. So you see, Sinjun," Catherine continued, sincerely, "you must show me everything that you desire, so that you will never have to go to other women again."

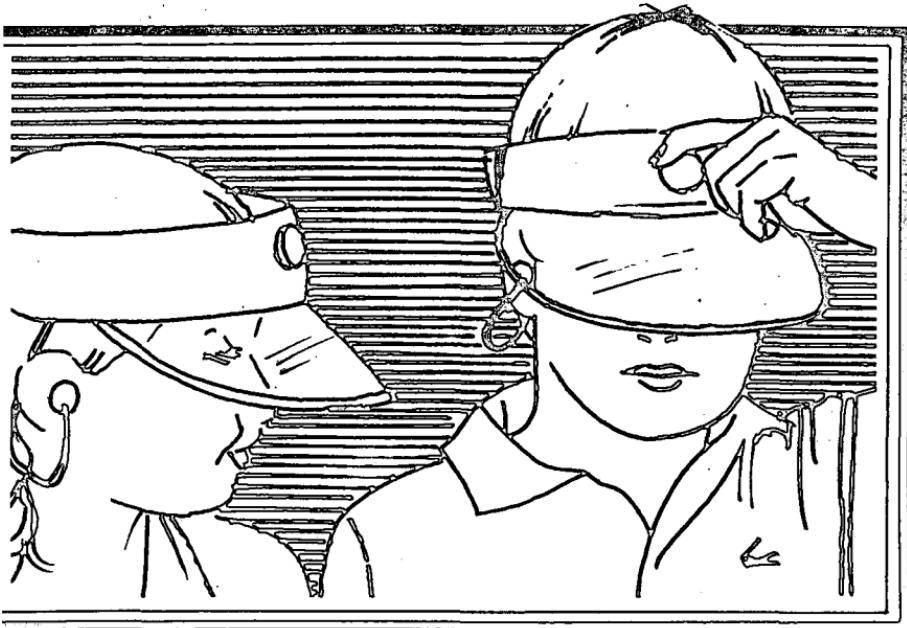
"Everything?" he asked, arching one eyebrow wickedly.

"Everything," she said staunchly.

"Oh Catherine, my delight," he said with a look upon his face that melted her resolve to be logical, "I will, and gladly, for I do love you. I shall do my best to make you my own dear doxy."

"And I love you terribly," she said as she went back into his arms. ♡





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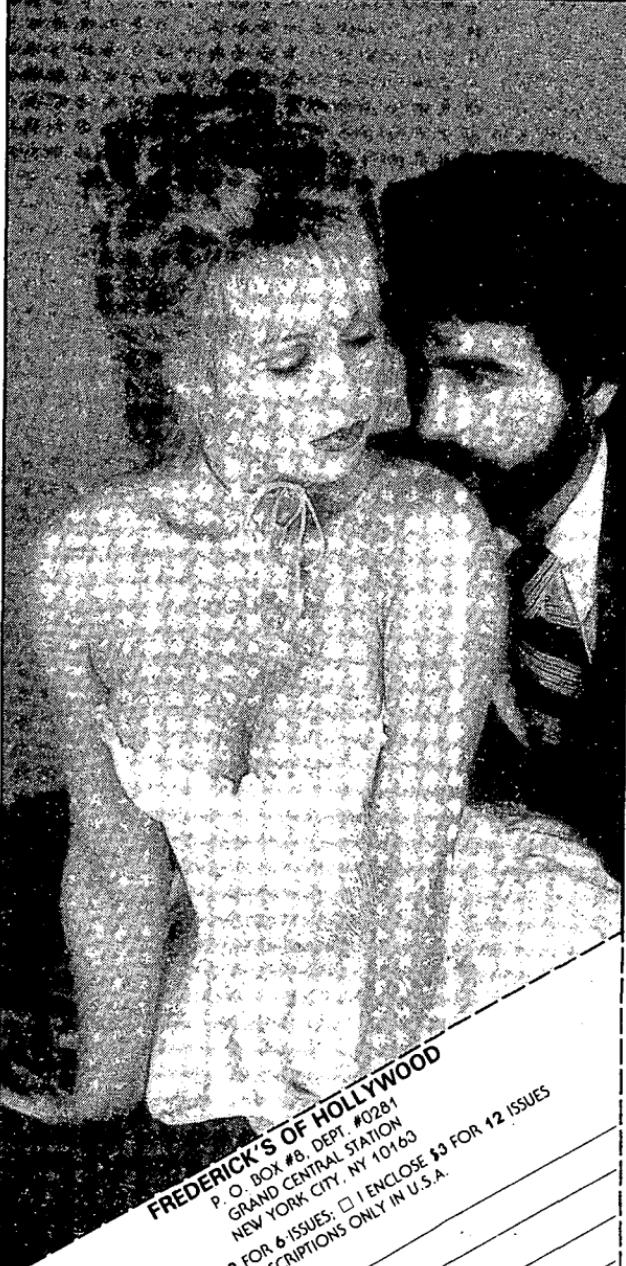
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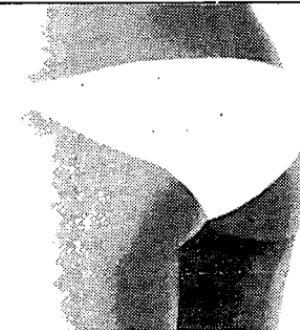
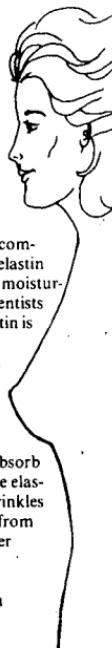


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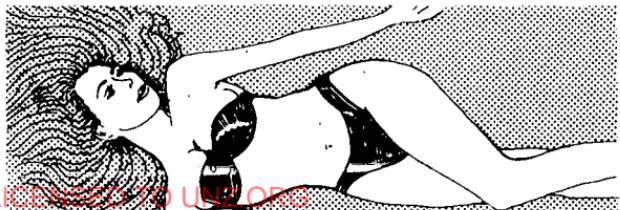
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